

Hospice not just about end of life.

In conducting workshops and helping families coping with dementia, I often see negative reactions when I even mention the word "hospice." This is unfortunate, because hospice offers many services useful to families living with the disease.

Many believe that hospice provides end-of-life services only. To the contrary, hospice can provide a wide range of valuable services to individuals and families both before and after the death of a loved one.

Perhaps the worst misunderstanding I've heard is that hospice somehow accelerates the dying process. This is simply not true. For end-of-life clients, hospice provides physical, emotional, and spiritual support while nature takes its course.

In these situations, hospice provides interdisciplinary care teams that can include medical directors, chaplains, nurses, social workers, home health aides, bereavement specialists and volunteers to provide a wide range of support. These teams don't "take over;" rather they work with your own physician to address your family's needs.

But the role of hospice does not end when your loved one dies. Beyond end-of-life support, hospice provides many additional services of real value to caregivers and their loved ones. Many hospice organizations provide bereavement counseling for the whole family, including both adults and youngsters who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

Many provide services tailor-made to specific constituencies, such as veterans services, grief and recovery camps for youth, services to families who are dealing with loved ones with dementia, and even networks for widows and widowers to help them remain active in the community during their time of loss.

As Jonathan Beard, Community Education Manager at Citrus Hospice, told me, "Hospice is not about dying; it is about living. It provides emotional, physical, and spiritual comfort for those in their final days, but it continues to be available to those who must live on; for the families and individuals who must move beyond the loss of a loved one."

But because many have an overly narrow understanding of the role of hospice, too few take advantage of their broader range of services. Beard states, "Typically, people wait too long to seek our services. Not only can

we help them earlier in the family's journey toward the end of life, but we can stay with them afterward to help them move more successfully to a new normal."

As caregivers, it is important that we understand the full range of services provided by the various hospice organizations. They are not just for the individual who is under care or approaching the end of life. They can be helpful to their families and caregivers as well.

Debbie Selsavage is a Certified Trainer and Consultant in the Positive Approach to Care®, and a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Her company, Coping with Dementia LLC, is dedicated to making life better for individuals living with dementia. Contact Debbie at deb@coping.today to learn about free support groups on line.