

# Talking with Others about Their End-of-Life Wishes

NATIONAL HOSPICE AND PALLIATIVE CARE ORGANIZATION

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Even if you have done everything to communicate your own end-of-life wishes, you may find yourself in a situation where you need to take the initiative and have the discussion with family members or loved ones who have not shared their end-of-life wishes with you. Here are a few helpful pointers to keep in mind as you plan for having this conversation:

## Select an Appropriate Setting

Plan for the conversation; find a quiet, comfortable place that is free from distraction to hold a one-on-one discussion. Usually, a private setting is best.

## Ask Permission

People cope with end-of-life issues in many ways. Asking permission to discuss this topic assures your loved one that you will respect his or her wishes and honor them. Some ways of asking permission are:

- "I would like to talk about how you would like to be cared for if you got really sick. Is that okay?"
- "If you ever got sick, I would be afraid of not knowing the kind of care you would like. Could we talk about this now? I would feel better if we did."

## Know What To Expect

Keep in mind that you have initiated this conversation because you care about your loved one's wellbeing – especially during difficult times. Allow your loved one to set the pace. Try to focus on maintaining a warm and caring manner throughout the conversation by showing your love and concern:

- Nod your head in agreement
- Hold your loved one's hand
- Reach out to offer a hug or comforting touch

Questions you may want to ask your loved one about his or her end-of-life care wishes include:

- If you were diagnosed with a life-limiting illness, what types of treatment would you prefer?
- Have you named someone to make decisions on your behalf if you become unable to do so?
- How would you like your choices honored at the end of life?
- What can I do to best support you and your choices?

Understand that it is normal to encounter resistance the first time you bring up this topic. Don't be surprised or discouraged; instead, plan to try again at another time.

## Be a Good Listener

Keep in mind that this is a conversation, not a debate, sometimes, just having someone to talk to is a big help. Be sure to make an effort to hear and understand what the person is saying. These moments, although difficult, are important and special to both of you. Some important things you can do are:

- Listen for the wants and needs that your loved one expresses.
- Make clear that what your loved one is sharing with you is important to you.
- Show empathy and respect by addressing these wants and needs in a truthful and open way.
- Verbally acknowledge your loved one's rights to make life choices – even if you do not agree with those choices.

Having conversations with your loved ones about their end-of-life wishes can be a sensitive discussion. These conversations matter and are needed to learn about your loved one's wishes so that those wishes can be honored at the end of life.



