

Tips for Having a Difficult Conversation

- Encourage your loved one to have this conversation with you by using a hope/worry statement:
 - “While we both hope that you pull out of this, I worry that I won’t know your wishes if things get worse”
 - “While we both hope that you will get better, I worry that this conversation will be more difficult to have if you don’t get better”
- Make a time and safe space to have a conversation where you won’t be interrupted.
- Reframe your thoughts about the conversation. Instead of thinking about this as a conversation around dying, think of it as a loving conversation and a loving document that will help you both receive care that matches what you would want until your last moments.
- Include something pleasurable during the conversation such as a cup of coffee or tea, or relaxing music.
- Try talking about the conversation out of the context of your loved one’s diagnosis and current treatment. Think in more general terms of what each of you want for your life.
- Use a website such as www.fivewishes.org, www.theconversationproject.org, or www.prepareforyourcare.org to facilitate your conversation and give you a legal document to serve as a template. This takes the guessing out of the conversation and walks you through your options in a sensitive way. Here is another way to start the conversation:
- If you were to learn that your time is limited, how, where, and with whom would you like to spend your time? Some people value spending more time with family, some want to make sure to avoid bothersome symptoms or pain, and others value independence or being mentally clear.
- Ask to meet with a Palliative Care Physician to help facilitate this conversation. These physicians are trained in having these conversations and are experts in helping patients and caregivers make difficult decisions around their medical care.
- Take turns each expressing your wishes, so that the focus is on both of you, rather than just your loved one.
- If you know someone who died from a serious illness, think back to this time and see if you remember things that went well or things that did not go well. This can help inform your wishes and those of your loved one.
- After you have each expressed your wishes, write it down, put it somewhere safe, and then let it go, choosing to stay focused in the present and move forward with your day.
- Plan to do something enjoyable after such as eating your favorite meal, watching your favorite TV show, or going for a walk.
- As much as we try to anticipate, it is also quite normal for preferences to change once we are actually in the situation. Try to stay open to these changes and check in every so often.