

Serious Illness Conversation Guide



PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

SET UP "I'd like to talk **together** about what's happening with your health and do some thinking in advance about what matters to you, so you get the best care possible. **Is this ok?**"

ASSESS "What is **your sense of** where things are with your [illness] now?"

"How much **information** about what **might be ahead** with your [illness] would you like from me?"

SHARE "Would it be okay if I **share what I know** about where things are with your [illness]?"

UNCERTAIN: "It can be difficult to predict what will happen with your illness. I **hope** you will continue to live well for a long time [pause]. I'm also worried you could get sick quickly, and I think it's important to **prepare** for that possibility."

OR

TIME: "I **wish** we were not in this situation [pause]. I'm **worried** that time may be as short as ____ (express as a range, e.g., days to weeks, weeks to months, months to a year)."

OR

FUNCTION: "While I **hope** you're able to do things that are important to you, I'm **worried** this may be as well as you feel, and it may get harder to do these things because of your illness."

[Pause: Allow silence. Acknowledge/explore emotion. e.g., "I can imagine this is *hard* to hear."]

EXPLORE "**Given this situation**, what are your most **important goals** if your health gets worse?"

"What are your **biggest fears and worries** about the future with your health?"

"What gives you **strength** as you think about the future with your illness?"

"What **abilities** are so essential to your life that you can't imagine living without them?"

"If you get sicker, what would you be **willing to go through** for the possibility of gaining more time?"

"How much do the **people closest to you** know about your priorities and wishes?"

CLOSE "I've **heard** you say that ____ is really important to you. Did I get that **right?**"

"Keeping that in mind, and what we know about your illness, **could I make a recommendation?**"

"I **recommend** that we _____. This helps us make sure your care reflects what's important to you."

"How does this plan seem to you?"

"I will do everything I can to help you through this."



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CONVERSATION FLOW

1. SET UP THE CONVERSATION

- Introduce purpose
- Prepare for future decisions
- Ask permission

2. ASSESS UNDERSTANDING AND INFORMATION PREFERENCES

3. SHARE PROGNOSIS

- Share prognosis
- Frame as a “wish...worry”, “hope...worry” statement
- Allow silence, acknowledge emotions

4. EXPLORE WHAT MATTERS

- Goals
- Fears and worries
- Sources of strength
- Critical abilities
- Tradeoffs
- Family/trusted others

5. CLOSE THE CONVERSATION

- Summarize
- Make a recommendation
- Check in with patient
- Affirm commitment

6. DOCUMENT YOUR CONVERSATION

7. COMMUNICATE WITH KEY CLINICIANS

