

# Serious Illness Conversation Guide



## PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

### SET UP

"I'd like to **talk together** about what's happening with your health and **what matters to you**.  
**Would this be ok?"**

### ASSESS

"To make sure I **share information** that's **helpful to you**, can you tell me **your sense** of what's happening with your [health]?"

"How much **information** about what **might be ahead** with your [health] is helpful to discuss today?"

### SHARE

"Would it be ok if I **share what I know** about what may be ahead with your [health]?"

*UNCERTAIN:* "It can be difficult to predict what will happen. I **hope** you will feel as well as possible for a long time, and we will work toward that goal. **It's also possible** you could get sick quickly, and I think it is important **we prepare** for that."

OR

*FUNCTION:* "It can be difficult to predict what will happen. I **hope** you will feel as well as possible for a long time, and we will work toward that goal. **I'm also worried** that it may get harder to do things because of your [illness], and I think it is important **we prepare** for that."

OR

*TIME:* "I **wish** this was not the case [pause]. I'm **worried** time may be as short as \_\_\_\_ (*express as a range, e.g., days to weeks, weeks to months, months to a year*)."

**[Pause: Allow silence. Validate and explore emotions e.g., "I can imagine this is *hard* to hear."]**

### EXPLORE

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

"What are your **biggest worries**?"

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

"What brings **joy** and **meaning** to your life that you **can't imagine living without**?"

"If your illness gets worse, what are you **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?"

"Having talked about this, **what else** do you **want me to know** about you, or your **hopes** for your health?"

### CLOSE

"I've heard you say that \_\_\_\_ is really important to you and you are **hoping** for \_\_\_\_\_. **Did I get that right**?"

"Keeping that in mind, and what we know about your [health], **may 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 **support you** through this and help you get the **best care possible**."

# Serious Illness Conversation Guide



## CONVERSATION FLOW

### 1. SET UP THE CONVERSATION

- Introduce purpose
- Ask permission

### 2. ASSESS UNDERSTANDING AND INFORMATION PREFERENCES

### 3. SHARE UNDERSTANDING

- Share a time-based, function-based, or uncertain statement (see examples)
- Frame as a “wish...worry”, “hope...worry” statement
- Allow silence, validate, and explore emotions

### 4. EXPLORE WHAT MATTERS

- Goals
- Worries
- Sources of strength
- Joy and meaning
- Tradeoffs
- What those closest know
- What else/hopes

### 5. CLOSE THE CONVERSATION

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

### 6. DOCUMENT YOUR CONVERSATION

### 7. COMMUNICATE WITH KEY CARE TEAM MEMBERS

