

Conversations Regarding End of Life Issues

By: Melissa Jeremiah, RN

Director of Hoosier Uplands Home Health and Hospice

Talking to your loved ones about end of life issues may not come easy to you. It is important for these talks to occur because talk is the single most important thing that family and friends can do to prepare for the end of life of someone they love. It makes it easier on a family if they know they are abiding by their loved ones wishes and not just making assumptions that this is what their loved one would want. It also helps to keep the family unit closer when the family is not torn apart by what each side feels would be what their loved one would want. It is ideal for these talks to occur before the crisis, too often these conversations don't occur at all or take place when there is no time left for honest discussion and reflection.

Keep in mind that when these conversations begin there will be times when you may not agree with or will be totally shocked at what your loved one wants, that is another reason why it is of great importance to have these talks. No two people are exactly alike when it comes to decisions regarding their end of life care and there are no wrong answers. You must enter into any conversation with an open mind and not with the opinion that you are going to impose your beliefs and wishes on your loved one. This is a time for you to learn what your loved one thinks about the choices that are available and why. Also, keep in mind that you need to examine your own views first. Conversations are more effective when you have done your own emotional homework first.

Hopefully, after reading this article, everyone will be able to take advantage of conversation triggers, when they occur and have meaningful discussions regarding end of life issues.

Most loved ones gather for a meal following a funeral or visitation. This is a time when most people, even if they aren't verbalizing it, are giving thought to end of life issues. Some may be thinking, "I wouldn't want to go through that chemotherapy he went through for anything. I would rather be able to do what I want with my grandkids and enjoy life for a shorter time." Another person may be thinking, "Even the possibility of one more day would be important to me; I'd do everything I could to hold on to life. He was a fighter and I plan to do the same thing."

Other conversation triggers include:

Magazines, books and newspaper articles about illness and funerals

Movies, television talk shows, dramas and comedies

Sermons

The serious illness of someone you know

The death of a famous person

World events such as 9/11 and the Current War on Terror

Financial planning

Annual medical checkups

Family get togethers

If your family is one that communicates easily and can have forthright conversations you may want to take this route. Sit down with your spouse and discuss your end of life decisions. Then go to your parents and let them know your wishes as well. This would also be a good way to get the conversation flowing with your parents about what their wishes are as well.

Don't be surprised though if your conversation with your parents do not go as well as in the above example. Some people fear that talking about things such as death make them happen. You may get responses like, "You're healthy and young, and nothing bad is going to happen to you" or "Talk to your wife about it, but don't tell me. I don't want to know." You may continue with something like, "Deb and I have agreed on what we each want, and have written it down. My doctor has a copy. I plan to be conscious and able to communicate as long as possible, while Deb is worried about pain and would prefer to be sedated, even if it means being out of touch. Which do you think you would want?" You may get the response, "I don't want to choose. I want to die in my sleep." You may respond with, "That may happen, but you can't be sure of that." This may be as far as you can get at this point. But, you can continue to use other conversation triggers that occur to keep chipping away at the wall that your family member has built.

It is important to share your wishes regarding end of life care with your loved ones and your physician. Most people feel better knowing this planning is done and that their family and physician know their wishes. It is a hard thing to think about, but it is oftentimes a relief to face it.

Information for this article was obtained, in part, from Last Acts: Conversations Before The Crisis. For further information regarding Last Acts you may call them at 1-800-989-WILL or view their webpage at <http://www.partnershipforcaring.org>.