

Living Life on Your Terms
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Although everyone has their own personal opinions regarding Terri Schiavo, I feel that one thing we all can agree on is the need to have advance directives in place. Please do not let this opportunity pass, speak to your family regarding end of life issues. As we have all witnessed, it is important for these talks to occur before the crisis. It makes it easier on a family if they know they are abiding by their loved ones wishes and not just making assumptions as to what their loved one would want. It also helps to keep the family closer when the family is not torn apart by what each side feels would be what their loved one would want.

When you speak with your family there will be times when you may not agree with or will be totally shocked as to what your loved one wants, this 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. You must enter into the conversation with an open mind, knowing there are no wrong answers 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 really thinks about the choices that are available and why.

This is a time when most people, even if they aren't verbalizing it, are giving thought to end of life issues. Your loved ones thoughts may range from, "I wouldn't want to go through what Terri went through for anything. I would enjoy having lived for a shorter time," to "Even the possibility of one more day would be important to me; I'd do all I could to hold on to life."

If your family is one that communicates easily you may want to gather information regarding advance directives and sit down with your family to openly discuss your end of life decisions. You can obtain advance directive information free of charge at www.nhpco.org. Once you are on the NHPCO website click on Hospice & Palliative Care Information then click on End of Life Care: Advance Care Planning.

Don't be surprised if your conversation does not go as you had planned. 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 Dad 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 to keep chipping away at the wall that your loved one 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 once it has been faced.

Information for this article was obtained, in part, from NHPCO. For additional information regarding advance directives you may visit their website at www.nhpc.org or call 1-800-658-8898.