

# Serious Illness Conversation Guide



This guide offers clinicians language to talk to seriously ill patients about their goals, values, and wishes. The guide can help support more, better, and earlier conversations between clinicians and patients that can inform future care.

## CONVERSATION FLOW

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| <b>1</b> | <b>Set up the conversation</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce purpose</li><li>• Prepare for future decisions</li><li>• Ask permission</li></ul>  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Assess understanding and preferences</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask questions and listen</li><li>• Explore their understanding of illness progression</li><li>• Consider acceptability of prognostic information</li></ul>   |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Share prognosis</b>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Share prognosis</li><li>• Frame as a “wish...worry”, “hope...worry” statement</li><li>• Allow silence, explore emotion</li></ul>   |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Explore key topics</b>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goals</li><li>• Fears and worries</li><li>• Sources of strength</li><li>• Critical abilities</li><li>• Benefits and harms</li><li>• Trade-offs</li><li>• Family</li><li>• Location of care</li></ul> |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Close the conversation</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Summarize</li><li>• Make a recommendation</li><li>• Check in with patient</li><li>• Affirm commitment</li></ul>  |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Document your conversation</b>           |  |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Communicate with key clinicians</b>      |  |
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## PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

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- SET UP** | "I'd like to talk about what is ahead with your illness and do some thinking in advance about what is important to you so that I can make sure we provide you with the care you want and avoid treatments that cause more harm than good – **is this okay?**"
- ASSESS** | "What is **your understanding** now of where you are with your illness?"  
"How much **information** about what is likely to be ahead with your illness would you like from me?"
- SHARE** | "I want to share with you **my understanding** of 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, but I'm **worried** that you could get sick quickly, and I think it is important to prepare for that possibility."  
OR  
**Time:** "I **wish** we were not in this situation, but I am **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:** "I **hope** that this is not the case, but I'm **worried** that this may be as strong as you will feel, and things are likely to get more difficult."
- EXPLORE** | "What are your most important **goals** if your health situation worsens?"  
"What are your biggest **fears and worries** about the future with your health?"  
(e.g. Struggling to breathe, being alone, depending entirely on others)  
"What **abilities** are so critical to your life that you can't imagine living without them?"  
"What **helps you** through the tough times?"  
"If you become sicker, **how much are you willing to go through for the possibility of gaining more time?**"  
(e.g. the ability to communicate, the ability to interact with others, the ability to control your bodily functions.)  
"How much does your **family** know about your priorities and wishes?"
- CLOSE** | "I've heard you say that \_\_\_\_\_ is really important to you. Keeping that in mind, and what we know about your illness, I **recommend** that we\_\_\_\_\_. This will help us make sure that your treatment plans reflect what's important to you."  
"How does this plan seem to you?"  
"I will do everything I can to help you through this."