

Advance Directives, Living Wills, and Other Medical Orders

A 4-Step Conversation Guide

Why is having a conversation about advance directives, living wills, and other medical order documents important?

Having an end-of-life conversation with a loved one is never easy. A helpful way to start is by reframing the conversation as a gift to your loved one and yourself. Discussing advance directives, living wills, and other medical order documents gives your senior loved one the power of making their medical wishes known, with the legal guarantee that those decisions will be followed.

While this conversation can be an emotional and overwhelming one, it can offer a feeling of assurance and confidence later on. Use our four-step guide to help make discussions about advance directives and end-of-life preferences easier.



Step one: Be Prepared

It can be helpful to familiarize yourself with the different types of advance directives and complementary medical orders for your loved one's care coordination. Along with spending time learning about these documents, it's beneficial to research facilities and programs for end-of-life care in your area, such as hospice and palliative care providers, as well as other senior living options.



You might also find it useful to complete your own advance directive, living will, or equivalent document. Going through the steps yourself can offer you greater empathy and also prepare you for the difficult decisions your loved one may face throughout their process.

To help your loved one compile a comprehensive advanced-planning resources enclosed (CARE) folder, here's a checklist of advance directives and complementary medical orders to consider:

- ☐ Durable power of attorney for health care, or Health Care Proxy
- ☐ Living will
- ☐ Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST)
- ☐ Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (MOLST)
- ☐ Do-Not-Resuscitate Order (DNR)

It's important to note that the names and requirements of these documents can vary from state to state. Be sure to check with an elder law attorney to learn about each state's specific laws.

Step two: Choosing the right place and time

Making sure your loved one feels comfortable and confident throughout this difficult conversation is important. After you spend time preparing for the conversation, think about the environment you and your family member will be most comfortable in. This can easily brighten the mood and foster positivity.

Think of a few places where your loved one will feel most comfortable for this conversation and list them below:

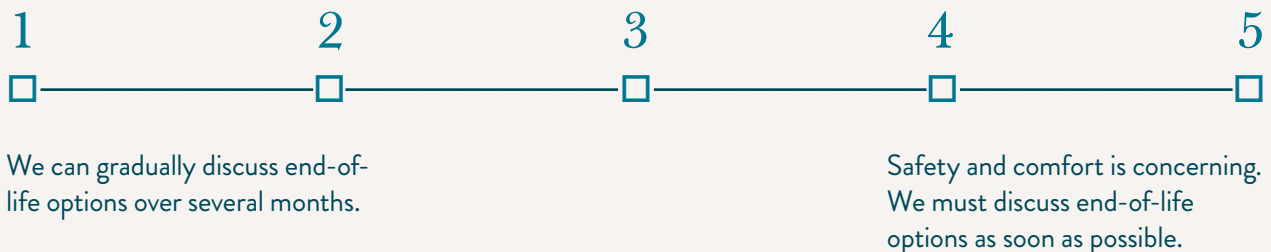
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when planning the conversation:

Is there urgency?

In the event that your loved one has become more prone to hospitalizations and emergency room visits, you might consider bringing up this sensitive topic after a recent medical visit or change in health status. Even during a stressful time, it's important to practice empathy and be a source of comfort. Rate the urgency of your need for discussion on the scale below.

Based on my loved one's health status...



Who needs to be involved?

You don't have to have this conversation alone. Is there someone you would like to join the discussion who would help your loved one feel more comfortable? Would it be beneficial to have someone else there to support you and your loved one?

Here's a checklist for considering who should be part of the conversation:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spouse/Partner | <input type="checkbox"/> Faith Leader(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Children | <input type="checkbox"/> Family member(s) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doctor(s) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social worker | |

Step three: Start the conversation

It's normal to feel a full range of uncomfortable emotions when discussing a loved one's end-of-life preferences, as the topic of death remains largely taboo. To approach the subject gently, you can start by learning what really matters to your loved one, discussing their life goals, and even sharing your own health care wishes.

Here are a few prompts and/or questions that can help you when starting the conversation:

- “When _____ passed away, I felt _____...”
- “At the moment, _____ is important to me.”
- “When times feel difficult, _____ helps me get through it.”
- “My biggest concern for the future is _____...”
- “You know I love you, I just worry about _____...”
- “I was wondering if you could help me with something.”
- “I’ve been doing research on end-of-life options for myself, would you want to learn about it with me?”



Step four: Listen and take notes

As you ask questions and guide the conversation, don't forget to prioritize active listening. By engaging your body language, avoiding judgment, and expressing empathy, you'll set a tone of safety and security. You might also find it helpful to write down the questions and concerns your loved one has throughout the process. Keep these factors in mind as you invite them to share what's on their mind.

Notes:

Offer reassurance

If your loved one becomes emotional during the conversation, remind them that you love them and that you want their wishes to be respected as they age.

In case they start to feel uncomfortable with the discussion, write down some things that you can say to comfort and validate their feelings:

1.

2.

3.

Offer encouragement

As a caregiver or family member, you can encourage your loved one to be prepared, but they have to make their own decision to pursue an advance directive.

When those you care for need encouragement, your first step should always be to stop and listen. Take time to empathize with where they are in their journey and visualize how they will best receive your affirmations.

Reflect on the following statement and circle or write in what you think would work best for them:



“My loved one feels most cherished and encouraged when/through _____.”



- ☐ Physical touch (i.e. hugs, pats on the back, hand holding, etc.)
- ☐ A warm smile
- ☐ They feel heard
- ☐ They're acknowledged
- ☐ They're celebrated
- ☐ They receive a gift
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

It's important to note that sometimes there are no “right words” to say when offering reassurance and encouragement to people we love. Below, you'll find a few tips that may help you navigate the conversation with sensitivity:

Instead of this:

“You're strong, you can do this.”



Try this instead:

“I'm here to help you through this. You're not alone.”

Instead of this:

“Don't worry, it will be fine.”



Try this instead:

“It's okay to be scared or worried. You can talk to me if you ever need to.”

Instead of this:

“Let me know how I can help.”



Try this instead:

“Let's talk about some specific things that I could do that would be helpful for you.”

Spend time listening to your loved one and empathizing with their questions, concerns, and feelings, doing your best to avoid common clichés and platitudes.

What's next? A post-conversation check-in:

Now that you've broken the ice and started the conversation, you may find it important to reflect on questions or concerns brought up by your loved one during the process.

1. How did the conversation with _____ make me feel?
2. Am I emotionally ready to handle all of the situations we talked about?
3. Is there anything we didn't discuss that we should talk about soon?

Do you have any other thoughts or concerns? Write them below:



Closing thoughts

Depending on your response to the “Is there urgency?” section above, you may want to start planning out the next steps as soon as possible. This could be meeting with an Elder Law Attorney to create legal documents; compiling an easy-to-access CARE folder; or sharing legal documents with other family members, caregivers, and anyone else your loved one would want to inform about their medical wishes.

Don't forget to ask for help if you or your loved one starts to feel overwhelmed with this process. Between professional assistance and other family members or caregivers, you are not alone.

Sources:

- AgingCare. [“What to Say to Someone Who Is Dying.”](#)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [“Preparing for Challenging Conversations With Families.”](#)
- Greater Good Science Center. [“Active Listening.”](#)
- Institute for Healthcare Improvement. [“Your Conversation Starter Guide.”](#)
- Karen Watt. [“How to Talk to an Elderly Parent About End-of-Life Decisions.”](#)