



# Senior Series

A partnership between Ohio State University Extension  
and Ohio Aging Network professionals



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and Ohio State University Extension's "Aging in Ohio" web site at: <http://seniorseries.osu.edu>

## Communication About the End of Life

Talking about death and other end of life topics can be very difficult. In the American culture, death is viewed as a "forbidden" topic often whispered about and not discussed openly. Unlike other countries and cultures, formal education about death and bereavement is not included in school curriculums. More frequently, we learn about the cycle of life and death only through personal experiences.

Although having conversations about end of life topics may not be a popular idea, it is extremely important. Communication increases the chance that you and your loved ones' wishes will be met should anyone become ill,

incapacitated, or die. Experts agree that when people do not make decisions in advance, they will likely end up in the hands of a health care system that has neither the time nor inclination to find out their personal preference for care. By making plans and decisions before a crisis occurs, you can place your loved ones in a position of power and knowledge. Instead of wondering what you may have wanted, your family can be sure that your wishes are respected.

Here are some strategies for starting a conversation with your loved ones about end of life decisions:

- There is no perfect time to have this conversation but it is wise to

wait for a time when you are both in a good mood and have the time to talk.

- You may consider having this conversation in an environment where you have the other person's undivided attention, such as in a car or on a walk.
- It might feel more comfortable to bring up the topic indirectly by focusing on yourself and your own end of life decisions. For example, "I have decided to make some important decisions should I become ill or have an accident. I am doing this to make things easier for the ones I care about. I realized I don't know what your thoughts are about this topic. Maybe we could talk about that?"
- It is much easier to talk about the importance of end of life decisions if you have made these decisions yourself. Use your own wishes as a way to approach specific topics or questions.
- Another approach is to bring up an example of another family member or friend who is ill or has passed away. Ask your loved one how they would want things handled if they were in that situation. Emphasize the

importance of writing these wishes down to increase the chances they are followed.

- Because reactions to this topic will vary, be prepared to delay the discussion to another time. Your loved one may need time to consider this issue and not be ready for a discussion right away. Note of caution: be sure to follow up.
- Following up a conversation about the end of life may require gentle persistence, but do not give up. Sometimes providing an article about end of life planning or an advanced directive document is a helpful conversation starter.

### **Questions to Consider and Discuss**

- If you become ill and can't make decisions for yourself, what would you like to have happen?
- Is there someone you would like to make health care decisions for you if you cannot make them yourself?
- Are there any treatments, such as life support or intravenous tube feeding, that you want to receive or refuse?

- Do you have any fears or concerns about medical treatments you might receive? If so, what are they?
- If you ever become ill and you are in pain, do you want medication even if it makes you drowsy or sleepy?
- What does “dying with dignity” mean to you?

After you have been successful talking about end of life planning decisions with your family member, what do you need to do next?

- Encourage your loved one to put their wishes on paper by filling out an advance directive or other legally recognized document. Emphasize that unless their wishes are written down, health care professionals may not recognize them.
- Encourage your loved one to discuss their wishes with family members. Talking openly about their wishes now will reduce potential misunderstandings between family members in the future.
- Emphasize the need for your loved one to provide copies of

their advance directive to yourself and other family members who will be involved in their care should they become ill.

- Be sure any advance directive document is stored in a safe place that is known about and easily accessible by others.
- Family members also need to inform their doctor of any end of life decisions and provide him or her with a copy of their legal document.

Having conversations about end of life planning issues is never easy. These discussions force us to face our own mortality and the mortality of those we love. An important point to remember, however, is that having these conversations today can make the lives of those you love a little less difficult in the future.

## Sources

*The Next Steps Guide*. Aging with Dignity. [www.agingwithdignity.org/](http://www.agingwithdignity.org/)

*Talking About Your Choices*. Partnership for Caring: America’s Voices for the Dying. [www.partnershipforcaring.org](http://www.partnershipforcaring.org)

## Helpful Resources

*Organizing Your Future: A Guide to Decision-Making in Your Later Years* (D13877) published by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

*Planning for Incapacity* (D14513) published by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

*The Next Steps Guide. Aging with Dignity.* [www.agingwithdignity.org/](http://www.agingwithdignity.org/)

*Talking About Your Choices.*

Partnership for Caring: America's Voices for the Dying. [www.partnershipforcaring.org](http://www.partnershipforcaring.org)

NOTE: To obtain a copy of a state-specific advance directive, see an attorney, consult your local American Bar Association, State Department on Aging, Area Agency on Aging or Extension county office, or contact your state Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

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