

How to Communicate Your End-of-Life Decision

Pat, something's on my mind

How can I help?

Well, it's one of those subjects that's kind of hard to get into...

Come on, Leslie. You can talk to me about anything.

Okay. Here goes: I'd like to talk about what would happen if I were in an accident and unable to make medical decisions. I know what I would want for myself. And I want us all to be prepared should that time come.

In the previous *Decision* bulletins, we talked about medical progress and quality of life—and how they influence the choices we make about how we want to live our remaining days. If you've identified your values about the quality of your life, the next step is for you to communicate your wishes. The following guidelines can help.

Choose the Right Person

First things first...select the person you feel is best able to speak for you should you ever be unable to do so yourself. This person is sometimes referred to as your surrogate (substitute) decision-maker. No matter whom you choose, make sure that person clearly understands your values and beliefs—and is willing and able to speak on your behalf. It's best *not to assume* that your closest companion feels the same way you do. For example, if your spouse or partner is not comfortable with carrying out your preferences, consider a mature child, sibling, extended family member or close friend.

The Third in a Series of Six Bulletins

Feel free to share this and the other Decisions bulletins with your loved ones and doctors.

1. **The changing role of medicine and our changing view of death**
2. **Quality of life**
3. **How to communicate your decision with loved ones**
4. **Tools of communication**
5. **Building a partnership with your doctor**
6. **Living and dying in a caring community**

Talk about Your Values and Choices

What's the best way to communicate? Just start talking—in the car, in the kitchen, at a restaurant, in the park or on the phone... whatever feels right for you.

Talk in a way your spokesperson can understand about the medical choices you'd make if you were seriously ill or injured. Be specific. Think about what it would be like to narrowly survive a disease or accident—and how you would prefer to live out your remaining days.

- Do you feel comfortable receiving help to bathe, dress, eat and get around?
- How do you feel about spending your final days in the hospital?
- What if you had trouble talking with others?
- What if you were permanently dependent on life support machines?
- Do you want to stay alive even if you'd never regain consciousness?

Tough questions, we admit. But your answers form the basis of your end-of-life decisions.

Make the Time

The old adage goes, "You never find time, you make time." Here's how to make time to communicate your values about the end of life.

Discuss the issue now—while you're healthy. There is no way to anticipate what might happen to you. Expressing your preferences ahead of time—in anticipation instead of by necessity—assures that you will be heard.

Use movies and news stories to open opportunities to discuss, "if that happened to me, here's what I'd do."

What's more, you'll have peace of mind that your family knows what you want.

Plus if you talk about it when

you're feeling full of vigor, your conversation is more apt to be objective and focused.

Use current events as a springboard. Every day, the media serve up thought-provoking and conversation-stimulating topics. Let movies and news stories open opportunities to discuss "if that happened to me, here's what I'd do or want done for me."

It is never too early to begin these discussions. Your life experiences may change your views and values and affect the decisions you make. If you have a change of heart, make it known by talking with your chosen surrogate decision-maker. One family finds it helpful to set aside a time each year for such a discussion.

The Important Thing is to Communicate

There's no right or wrong way to communicate—as long as you do communicate. Perhaps you want to put your feelings down in writing rather than have a face-to-face conversation. Maybe you'd feel better in neutral territory such as a car or restaurant. Whatever works for you is the best way to communicate your personal values and decisions.

Next Bulletin: The tools of communication

The legal tools available to help make your wishes known.

Written by a diverse group of healthcare professionals and clergy dedicated to informing the public about end-of-life decisions.