

Crucial Conversations

The coronavirus pandemic highlights how much we need to have conversations about end-of-life issues.

Few families, of course, enjoy talking about serious issues. Money. Estate plans and inheritance (who gets what and why). End of life care. Most conversations never get off the ground.

Talking about Death

Here's how one person opened a conversation about death with her own parents recently: "Mom, Dad, seeing a lot of people getting very sick with the coronavirus made me think of both of you. None of us knows what's around the corner, and I want to be sure I know what you would want for yourselves when you get very sick. I want to be your voice so that I can make decisions for you, not for myself."

This person, a doctor in a hospital, used guidance from some resources. Three that are online are [The Conversation Project](#), the [Serious Illness Conversation Guide](#), and [Five Wishes](#). Most of these essentially create a living will.

Answering Questions for Yourself

For this doctor, working in a hospital with patients suffering from the coronavirus made her ask herself the questions that we all should ask ourselves and the people we love. Here is the way she answered:

- What is most important to me in my life? (My family and pets, and the ability to write and doctor).
- What makes my life meaningful? (My work; dancing; being outdoors; being with my loved ones).
- What sort of quality of life would be unacceptable to me? (Being permanently bed-bound or neurologically devastated; indignity and suffering; depending on others for personal care).
- Who is best positioned to speak on my behalf? (My brother).
- Who would I *not* want involved in decision making? (Family living abroad).
- Would I want to undergo C.P.R. should my heart stop? (Only if the issue leading to the cardiac arrest is reversible. If my heart stopped even when I was being sustained on life support machines or dying from an incurable disease, then I'd prefer to die peacefully rather than with C.P.R.).
- What would bring me comfort if I were hospitalized? (Pictures of my family; music I love playing in my room; prayer).

Guiding Questions

The Conversation Project offers more questions as well as guidance on how and when to begin these conversations. The Serious Illness Conversation Guide gives health care providers a road map of when and how to start asking patients about dying. Both resources offer the compassionate, incisive — and often unfamiliar — language required for us to ask the right questions and empower our loved ones to share specific, honest answers. Five Wishes is a fill in the blank pdf (or a print form they mail), though you could easily talk about the answers.

Digging Deeper

These conversations fill an immediate need of course. But they are also an entrée to broader and deeper conversations reflected in the growing interest in ancestry and family stories — DNA kits leave us wanting to know more, and our awareness of dementia and death makes them more urgent. About a third of Americans admire what their parents have achieved but don't know how they did it. Check out the StoryCorps oral history project with its [suggested questions](#). And there are journaling apps too.

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