



Serious Illness Conversation Guide

These are suggested steps for having serious illness conversations with patients. They are based on best practices in the field.*

Research and prepare: Review the patient’s medical condition and prognosis; prepare the meeting space; make sure the right people will be in the room; welcome and make introductions.

Understand what the patient already knows: “What is your understanding now of where you are with your illness?”

Ask – information preferences: “How much information about what is likely to be ahead with your illness would you like from me?” “How would you like to receive information?”

Tell – share prognosis: Tailor this information to their preferences; then stop talking.

Ask – understanding: Ask patient to tell you back what they understand.

Answering questions: Be truthful; your answers are often a validation of what they already know.

Learn what’s important: “If your health worsens, how much are you willing to go through for the possibility of gaining more time?” “What are your most important goals?” “What are your biggest fears and worries?” “What abilities are so critical to your life that you can’t imagine living without them?” “How much does your family know about your wishes?”

Explain the options

Write down what was said: Include when you will see them next and how they can reach you. Document in the medical record.

*Based on the Serious Illness Conversation Guide (2013) and The Human Connection of Palliative Care: Ten Steps for What to Say and Do (2013).