

Larry Greer's ideas about A Guide to Family Conversations at End of Life

If you don't have time to listen to Larry's presentation, some of his helpful ideas for having these (sometimes) difficult conversations include:

Everyone has different wishes and thoughts for what end of life looks like, and it's important to have these conversations early on so that when the time comes those conversations have already happened and then it's simply a matter of respecting our loved one's wishes.

Larry quoted Dr. Ira Byock's book, Four Things That Matter Most, and said that these are very powerful ideas to begin the conversation with. Say:

1. "Please forgive me".
2. "I forgive you".
3. "I love you".
4. "Thank you".

Larry finds that when both parties know what is happening (that one of the parties is dying), it is still hard to open up and really talk honestly for fear of the other party's feelings. Understanding that this can be a difficult conversation, think about what questions you want answered before you begin the discussion. What topics do you need to make sure you bring up? It can be a deep meaningful question involving spirituality or it can be something as mechanical as where the dying person keeps their passwords. It is all important information!

Thinking about our own mortality is important, and Larry encourages people to fill in the blank in this sentence: What matters to me at end of life is _____. The answer to that is different for nearly everyone. What matters most to you? What legacy do you want to leave your friends and family?

When you're facing end of life you should communicate to your physician what abilities are most important to you, and what medical procedures you feel are or aren't worth pursuing at this point.

Gather your family to have this discussion about your end of life wishes, and before you gather, think about these basics:

Who will I invite to be part of this discussion? Family/friends/religious leaders/physicians?

What do I want to say? Here are some things that can help you think about how to guide the conversation:

1. How would you like your end of life to be?



2. Who do you want/not want to be part of your care at end of life?
3. Are there important milestones you want to reach? A birth/wedding/holiday?
4. Are there medical treatments you do or don't want?
5. Do you want to be alone or with your family when your time comes?
6. Is there poetry, music, scripture that you want to be part of your end of life experience?
7. Are there spiritual rituals that are important to you that you want to incorporate into your end of life?
8. Who will be your advocate through end of life? Ask this person early so that you know that they are willing and able to fulfill your wishes.

The Conversation Project has some suggestions for conversation starters:

1. "I need your help with something".
2. "I need to think about the future and I'm wondering if you might help me".
3. "I was thinking about what happened to _____ and it made me realize _____".
4. "Even though I'm okay right now I want to be prepared for the future".

These ideas are all starting points and suggestions. Sometimes bringing up the topic is the hardest part. After that you can simply let the conversation happen. Be patient. Allow others time to think about your ideas. This is an ongoing conversation, and it won't usually be wrapped up in one sitting.

Don't be judgmental. Remember that a good death means something different to everyone. Remember to respect this tenet.

Put everything that you decide in writing and use legal documents like advanced directive forms and Healthcare Power of Attorney Forms so that you have someone who can speak for you when you can't speak for yourself.

