

# Serious Illness Conversation Guide

## CONVERSATION FLOW

### 1. Set up the conversation

- Introduce purpose
- Prepare for future decisions
- Ask permission

### 2. Assess understanding and preferences

### 3. Share prognosis

- Share prognosis
- Frame as a “wish...worry”, “hope...worry” statement
- Allow silence, explore emotion

### 4. Explore key topics

- Goals
- Fears and worries
- Sources of strength
- Critical abilities
- Tradeoffs
- Family

### 5. Close the conversation

- Summarize
- Make a recommendation
- Check in with patient
- Affirm commitment

### 6. Document your conversation

### 7. Communicate with key clinicians



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## PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

- SET UP** “I’d like to talk about what is ahead with your illness and do some thinking in advance about what is important to you so that I can make sure we provide you with the care you want — **is this okay?**”
- ASSESS** “What is **your understanding** now of where you are with your illness?”  
“How much **information** about what is likely to be ahead with your illness would you like from me?”
- SHARE** “I want to share with you **my understanding** of where things are with your illness...”  
*Uncertain:* “It can be difficult to predict what will happen with your illness. I **hope** you will continue to live well for a long time but I’m **worried** that you could get sick quickly, and I think it is important to prepare for that possibility.”  
OR  
*Time:* “I **wish** we were not in this situation, but I am **worried** that time may be as short as \_\_\_\_ (*express as a range, e.g. days to weeks, weeks to months, months to a year*).”  
OR  
*Function:* “I **hope** that this is not the case, but I’m **worried** that this may be as strong as you will feel, and things are likely to get more difficult.”
- EXPLORE** “What are your most important **goals** if your health situation worsens?”  
“What are your biggest **fears and worries** about the future with your health?”  
“What gives you **strength** as you think about the future with your illness?”  
“What **abilities** are so critical to your life that you can’t imagine living without them?”  
“If you become sicker, **how much are you willing to go through** for the possibility of gaining more time?”  
“How much does your **family** know about your priorities and wishes?”
- CLOSE** “I’ve heard you say that \_\_\_\_ is really important to you. Keeping that in mind, and what we know about your illness, I **recommend** that we \_\_\_\_\_. This will help us make sure that your treatment plans reflect what’s important to you.”  
“How does this plan seem to you?”  
“I will do everything I can to help you through this.”