

Talking about dying

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Death is one of the most difficult subjects to discuss, but establishing an open and honest dialogue is one of the best ways to help people come to terms with the impending death of a loved one.

On a practical level, open discussion about what is going to happen allows the person nearing the end of their life, and their family and friends, to put in place plans so that everyone knows what their wishes are when the end comes.

At Canford Healthcare we have years of experience in caring for people at the end of their life, as well as providing the emotional support that their loved ones need at such a difficult time. Our

residents become part of our extended family, too, so we understand and share in the strong emotions when they die.

This guide offers some ideas about how to approach conversations about death and suggests how appropriate plans can easily and sensitively be put in place.



Talking about our death – or the death of a loved one – can be painful. However, with people we trust it can help enormously, both practically as well as emotionally.

Discussion can help give everyone the emotional support they need while bringing them closer together. For the person concerned, it is often a relief to have the subject out in the open, enabling everyone to start preparing for the future. It is a valuable chance to make sure that family and friends know what your wishes are and are willing or able to carry them out – even when you are no longer there or able to speak for yourself.

These could be anything from how you want to be cared for if you can no longer look after yourself – whether you want to move into a particular care home, for example – to who you want to manage your finances or make decisions about your care, or your preferences for your funeral arrangements.



Initiating a discussion about death is often the hardest part. Some people who may be superstitious worry that talking about things makes them more likely to happen, while others simply find it too upsetting to think about a time when their loved one is no longer with them.

It is often a good starting point to talk about what you want to happen if you become too ill to make decisions for yourself. Before beginning the conversation you might find it helpful to think about what you are going to say.

You could start with simple things such as the food you prefer to eat or the clothes you wish to wear, so that people know what your choices would be if you can no longer make or communicate them for yourself.

Or perhaps you have strong preferences, values or beliefs about how you would like to be cared for, or the types of treatment you would or would not wish to receive. You could try writing down your thoughts to help you through the conversation.

When you are ready to talk, plan an appropriate time and place to minimise the chances of being disturbed. Then let those you want to talk to know what you want to discuss in advance, so they have time to think and prepare for the conversation.

Do plan for several different conversational scenarios and for your loved ones to try and change the subject if they are reluctant to talk about it. If that happens, make it clear that this is important to you and that you would find it reassuring to know that everyone understands your wishes.

You may need to decide on some complex arrangements in advance so that you can be sure that your wishes will be carried out when the time comes.

These include:

Power of Attorney

This is when someone is given responsibility for making decisions about another person's financial affairs or their healthcare. You must be capable of making and communicating your wishes when a Power of Attorney is given. It cannot be set up on your behalf if you have lost the mental capacity to appoint someone.

Advance Statements and Decisions

You can make various statements and decisions about what you want to happen to you in the future if you are unable to communicate your wishes at the time.

An Advance Statement is not legally binding but allows you to set out your wishes about how you will be cared for. It must be considered by anyone making decisions about your care.

An Advance Decision, also called a living will, is legally binding and covers your intentions about the treatments that you do or do not wish to have in the future, and whether you wish to refuse life-sustaining treatment in certain circumstances.

Do Not Resuscitate (DNAR) decision

This is a written instruction to medical staff not to attempt to bring you back to life if your heart stops beating or you stop breathing.

Making a will

This is the only way you can make sure that the people you choose benefit from your estate, particularly if you are unmarried and wish your partner to inherit.

Inheritance Tax

Making your will can also help you to understand what Inheritance Tax might have to be paid on your estate.

Making funeral arrangements

It is a good idea to talk about (and write down) your wishes for your funeral, especially if you have strong beliefs or values which you want reflected in the arrangements. Having a plan in place for your funeral also helps your loved ones, as it takes away some of the pressure to make decisions when they are dealing with bereavement. You might also consider a pre-paid funeral plan to spare your family the cost of your funeral.

For more information on Power of Attorney, Advance Statements and Decisions, DNAR, making a will, Inheritance Tax and planning your funeral, take a look at our leaflet Preparing for End of Life at www.canfordhealthcare.co.uk/library

If you would like more advice about how to approach talking about dying there are several excellent sources of support:

Compassion in Dying

Compassion in Dying helps people prepare for end of life by talking about it, planning and recording their wishes. The free information line and website offer extensive resources and guidance. The organisation also specialises in helping people to make Advance Life Decisions/Living Wills. For more information go to www.compassionindying.org.uk.

Marie Curie

Marie Curie offers a range of support and information to help you, or someone close to you, if you have a terminal illness. For more information go to www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

If you feel you need more intensive support to deal with your feelings about dying, or the death of a loved one, you are not alone. To find a counsellor visit www.bacp.co.uk.

Which?

The Which? website has a useful section on end of life, with further guidance on how to approach conversations about dying. Go to www.which.co.uk/after-life-care/end-of-life.

This leaflet is part of a series designed to help people understand more about making safe and informed decisions about palliative and end-of-life care, how to find the best care home for you or a loved one and deal with some of the practicalities such as making a will or putting legal safeguards in place.

Visit our resource library for our other leaflets:
www.canfordhealthcare.co.uk/library

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