

# Compassionate Conversations



"When the dying person is finally communicating his or her most private feelings, do not interrupt, deny or diminish what the person is saying. The terminally ill or dying are in the most vulnerable situation in their lives and you will need all your skill and resources or sensitivity, and warmth, and loving compassion to enable them to reveal themselves."

Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

**End of life conversations can occur at any point during the health journey and are best conducted when the person is medically stable, comfortable and able to think clearly. The trigger to this discussion can be pain or discomfort, so it's important to ensure all symptoms are addressed.**

## General principles of good communication

- ✓ Make time and sit down in a quiet place. A perception of rushing should be avoided, as should interruptions.
- ✓ Plan for the conversation. Know the person's medical details and the medical team's view about prognosis. Have written resources available to leave with the person.
- ✓ Don't be focussed on notetaking or documentation during the discussion. The process will evolve over the course of the conversation. The conversation is more important than any forms of notes, however, be sure to document the discussion afterwards.
- ✓ Make sure the right people are in the room. Tell the person that you would like to provide some information about end-of-life care options and ask if they would like someone to be with them for the conversation.
- ✓ Find out the person's preference regarding how much information they want and with whom they want it shared.
- ✓ Make eye contact and be relaxed.
- ✓ Connect with them by responding empathetically to important statements the person makes.
- ✓ Make more listening time. When people are permitted to speak, they perceive that you are interested in them and in their views. This creates a good basis for an effective interaction.
- ✓ Answer questions openly and honestly. If you don't know the answer, tell them you will find out and come back to them.
- ✓ Use positive language. Focus on the options and care Mater can offer, and how these will remain open to the person, even if they seek other external services, including voluntary assisted dying.
- ✓ Reassure the person that they will not be judged whatever decisions and choices they make.
- ✓ Consider promoting end-of-life options as an opportunity for patients and their families. This may help to empower the person to plan for a time where they may no longer be able to make decisions for themselves. Inform the person of the benefits of discussing their end-of-life preferences with their family, caregivers, or significant others as well as the medical team.

**It can be difficult to be part of the conversation about someone's fears or plans for their end of their life. You may find it useful to consider reviewing phrases that you can use rather than trying to find the right words in the moment.**

**Remember that by listening and discussing end-of-life care options with the patient you are not forcing any particular view on them. You're giving them an opportunity to be heard and ask questions.**

### Acknowledging statements

- "That must have been really difficult to say..."
- "Thank you for trusting me with this..."
- "I can see you've thought a lot about this..."

### Exploring questions

- "What things are most important to you?"
- "What things worry you the most?"
- "Have you discussed this with your partner/family? How do they feel?"

**Sometimes the conversation can be very difficult and upsetting. Mater is committed to supporting all People in this process. We have pastoral care practitioners, social workers and trained nursing staff available to them.**

Mater's Employee Assistance Programs provide a free and confidential counselling service using experienced psychologists for challenges such as stress, family, relationships or work issues. Visit [assureprograms.com.au](http://assureprograms.com.au) or call **1800 108 374** for more information.

**"Each day is a step we make towards eternity and we shall continue thus to step from day to day until we take the last step, which will bring us into the presence of God."** – Catherine McAuley