

FROM DIAGNOSIS TO GOODBYE

How to Have Difficult Conversations During Serious Illness

Gentle Conversation Starters for Patients and Families

A free companion guide inspired by *From Diagnosis to Goodbye: Restoring the Patient's Voice Through Every Stage of the Journey*.

CHAPLAIN DERRICK HALL

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Before the Conversation

A serious illness may change daily routines, future plans, and the decisions a family faces. It does not diminish a person's need to be heard. Sometimes the hardest part is finding a gentle way to begin.

In *From Diagnosis to Goodbye*, I describe how families sometimes enter a pattern of “protective silence.” Loved ones may avoid difficult subjects to spare one another pain, even while each person longs for an honest conversation.

This short guide is not a checklist to complete. It is an invitation to make room for the patient's words, questions, and choices. Choose only what feels appropriate. You can return to these conversations another day.

Start with permission: “Would you feel comfortable talking about something that has been on my mind? It is okay if now is not the right time.”

Five Ways to Make Room for an Honest Conversation

Ask before you begin. Invite, rather than insist. Respect a person's decision to pause or decline.

Listen without correcting. Try to understand the feeling behind the words before offering reassurance.

Let silence have a place. A quiet pause can provide time to reflect; it need not be filled.

Follow the patient's lead. Ask what matters most to them today instead of assuming everyone shares the same priorities.

Return gently. One conversation need not resolve everything. Small conversations often build trust.

When You Do Not Know What to Say

The opening need not be perfect. Here are some phrases you can adapt to your relationship and the moment.

“How are you feeling about everything today?”

“Would you like me to listen, help you think through options, or simply sit with you?”

“Is there something you wish we would ask you about?”

“I may not have the answers, but I want to understand.”

“You can tell me what you feel, even if it is difficult to hear.”

“What would you like us to know about your wishes?”

When Fear, Sadness, or Frustration Appears

Try acknowledging what you hear: “That sounds frightening,” “I hear how important this is to you,” or “Thank you for telling me.” Avoid promising that everything will be fine or pushing someone to be positive.

If strong feelings arise, you can say: “Would you like to keep talking, take a break, or come back to this later?”

Remember: You do not have to agree with every feeling or solve every concern to respond with compassion.

Questions That Invite the Patient's Voice

Let the patient choose which questions to answer, if any. These prompts are invitations, not demands.

What matters today?

- What would make today a good day for you?
- What brings you comfort or peace right now?
- Is there something you would like to do or someone you would like to see?

Wishes and choices

- What is most important to you as we make decisions?
- How would you like us to include you in conversations with your care team?
- Are there questions you would like us to ask the doctor or hospice team?

Relationships and meaning

- Is there a story or memory you would like to share?
- Is there anything you want us to know?
- What do you hope our family will always remember?

Patient-centered practice: When a patient can participate in decisions, ask them directly rather than speaking over them. When communication is difficult, invite assistance from the care team to learn how best to understand and honor their preferences.

When Family Members Disagree

Illness can bring different expectations to the surface. One person may want more information, while another may need time. Someone may focus on treatment; someone else may focus on comfort. These differences do not automatically mean a lack of love.

Try these questions in a calm moment:

“Can we each share what worries us most, without interrupting?”

“What has our loved one told us matters most?”

“What do we need clarified by the healthcare team?”

“Can we pause and hear directly from the person whose care we are discussing?”

If a conflict concerns treatment options, consent, or decision-making authority, ask the clinical team for a family meeting. Healthcare professionals can clarify medical choices and help identify the appropriate decision-maker when necessary.

A Short Conversation Plan

- 1. Choose a quiet moment.** Reduce distractions and ask whether the person wants company or privacy.
- 2. Begin with one question.** Do not bring an entire agenda.
- 3. Reflect what you hear.** “What I hear you saying is...” Then ask if you understood correctly.
- 4. Ask what comes next.** “Is there one thing you would like us to do or talk about?”

A Space for Your Own Conversation

One conversation I would like to begin:

The person I want to listen to, and what I hope to understand:

One gentle opening sentence I can use:

Derrick's Closing Reflection

In my work as a hospice chaplain, I have learned that meaningful conversations do not depend on having perfect words. They often begin when someone feels safe enough to speak and another person is willing to listen.

You cannot remove every uncertainty that serious illness brings. You can, however, help create a moment in which someone feels understood, respected, and included. That is a gift worth offering.

Never allow the diagnosis to become louder than the patient's voice.

About This Guide

Adapted as an independent educational resource from the themes and conversation prompts of Chapter 5, "The Conversations That Never Happen," in *From Diagnosis to Goodbye: Restoring the Patient's Voice Through Every Stage of the Journey*, by Chaplain Derrick Hall.

Learn more and explore additional free guides at fromdiagnostogoodbye.com.

Educational note: This resource is intended for supportive conversation and education. It is not a substitute for individualized medical, mental health, legal, or spiritual guidance. Questions about care decisions should be discussed with the appropriate healthcare professionals.

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