

FROM DIAGNOSIS TO GOODBYE

Questions to Ask After a Terminal Diagnosis

A Practical Conversation Guide for Patients and Families

Chaplain Derrick Hall

A free companion resource adapted from the original book appendix

“One question can bring understanding. Another can bring peace. Never be afraid to ask either.”

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A Note Before You Begin

One of the first things many families tell me after receiving a terminal diagnosis is, "I didn't know what to ask."

That response is completely understandable. When someone hears life-changing news, the mind often becomes overwhelmed. Many people later say, "I wish I had thought to ask that while we were there."

This guide was created to help guide those conversations.

You do not need to ask every question. Some may not apply to your situation. Others may become important later in the journey.

Use this list as a companion rather than a checklist. Write your own questions in the space provided. Above all, remember that your healthcare team wants you to understand your loved one's care. No sincere question is ever a foolish question.

A guiding reminder

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

These questions are starting points for conversations, not substitutes for individualized medical advice. Invite the patient to lead whenever they are able and willing, and consult their healthcare team about diagnosis, care, and symptom concerns.

Understanding the Diagnosis

- Can you help us understand the diagnosis in everyday language?
- What changes should we expect in the coming weeks or months?
- What symptoms should we watch for?
- What changes would require us to call hospice immediately?
- What can we expect as the illness progresses?

Understanding Hospice Care

- What services does hospice provide?
- How often will members of the hospice team visit?
- Who should we call if something changes after normal business hours?
- What is the role of the nurse?
- What is the role of the chaplain?
- What is the role of the social worker?
- What is the role of the hospice aide?
- What support is available for family members?

Helping Our Loved One Live Well

- What brings the greatest comfort at this stage?
- Are there activities they still enjoy?
- What should we encourage?
- What should we avoid?
- How can we best support their emotional and spiritual needs?
- How do we include them in conversations and decisions?

Legacy Conversations

- Are there stories you would like us to record?
- Is there anyone you would like to see?

- Are there letters you would like to write?
- Would you like to record a message for your children or grandchildren?
- Are there family traditions you hope we continue?
- Is there anything you want future generations to know?

Practical Planning

- Where are important legal documents kept?
- Is there a will or trust?
- Are there final wishes you would like us to know?
- Are there funeral or memorial preferences you would like to share?
- Are there songs, readings, or Scriptures that are especially meaningful to you?

Emotional and Spiritual Questions

- What brings you peace?
- What worries you the most right now?
- How can we best support you emotionally?
- Would you like to pray together?
- Is there a favorite Scripture, hymn, or devotional you would like us to read?
- Is there anyone from your faith community you would like us to contact?

Questions for the Hospice Team

- What changes should we expect next?
- How do we know if our loved one is comfortable?
- What should we do if symptoms change suddenly?
- Who do we call if we are unsure about something?
- How can we better care for our loved one today?

Questions for Children

- What questions do you have?

- Is there anything that worries you?
- Would you like to spend time with Grandma or Grandpa?
- Is there a picture or letter you would like to make?
- Would you like to pray together?
- Is there anything you would like to say while you have the opportunity?

After Goodbye

- What bereavement services are available?
- Who can we call when grief feels overwhelming?
- What support groups are available in our community?
- How long does hospice continue offering bereavement support?
- What resources do you recommend for children?

Derrick's Final Thought

If I could leave you with one piece of advice, it would simply be this: Ask the question. Do not worry about asking the perfect question. Do not worry about whether you should already know the answer. Ask.

Questions open doors to understanding. Understanding often reduces fear. And when fear begins to lessen, families discover they are able to spend less time worrying... and more time loving. That is where your energy belongs. Not in wondering if you should have asked. But in faithfully walking the journey together, one conversation at a time.

Your Questions and Notes

Adapted from Appendix A of From Diagnosis to Goodbye: Restoring the Patient's Voice Through Every Stage of the Journey.

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