

Conversations Before the Crisis: Opportunities and Phrases

Opportune times to begin conversations can be called “conversation triggers.” These include:

- The deaths of relatives, friends or colleagues
- Newspaper articles about illnesses, car accidents and funerals
- Movies and plays
- Sermons
- Magazines and books
- Television talk shows and other programs
- Meetings with attorneys and financial planners
- Annual medical checkups and other medical appointments
- Family occasions such as baptisms, marriages, reunions, holiday gatherings and (especially) funerals and memorial services

Examples of words and phrases to begin conversations...

The death of famous people or someone made famous by a situation can help begin conversations.

“The way Terry Schiavo’s family couldn’t agree really upset me. I want to talk about my ideas and feelings and what I would want if I am ever in that situation, and I want to name someone to represent me. I want to know that I helped my family make the tough choices. I don’t want anyone to feel guilty, because they didn’t know what I wanted.”

The death of a colleague can prompt the following kind of conversation:

“I’ve been thinking about the end of life lately, including my own. I know it sounds strange. Nothing is wrong. But a friend at work had a terminal illness, and her family didn’t know what she wanted. The family couldn’t agree about putting her on a ventilator, and it made the whole situation very difficult. I don’t want to be the cause of family disagreements if I am seriously ill and unable to speak. That’s why I want to talk about my wishes if I can’t speak for myself.”

A movie or television show or a newspaper article might lead to a conversation such as:

“I saw (or read) something which really made me think about why I need to talk about what I would want if I was not going to recover from a bad car accident. I hope this never happens. But it would give me peace of mind if I knew my wishes would be respected by the doctors as well as the family.”

A visit to the doctor could prompt this conversation:

“At my annual physical last week, the doctor asked me if I had a Health Care Proxy who knew how to represent me if I was in such a bad state I couldn’t speak for myself. I know I should have taken care of this a long time ago, but I haven’t done it yet.

“I promised the doctor I wouldn’t put it off any longer. He gave me this information called “Sharing Your Wishes” which I read and would like for you to read, too. He says that talking about this won’t kill any of us and the sooner the better. He says that nobody will know what I would want if I don’t have a Proxy and I don’t talk about it. Would you be able to sit down with me soon to talk about this? I don’t want to go to another appointment without first taking care of this.”

A visit to an attorney could prompt the following:

“Our lawyer tells us that we need to think about more than our wills. We didn’t make any changes to our will, but he said that we need Health Care Proxy forms that appoint representatives to speak for us, if we can’t speak for ourselves. He says that New York State law requires this and now is the time to do this is, while we are healthy. If there are any disagreements about our care when we are unable to speak for ourselves, we might not get the kind of care we want. We want to talk about this with you and fill out the forms, so you don’t get left with hard choices.

We all might rather put this off, but we don’t want to see the family torn apart because we didn’t take responsibility and speak up now. We aren’t facing any big decisions right now, but we want to start talking before it’s too late, like our lawyer said.”

The illness or death of a friend who appointed a Health Care Proxy and had conversations about wishes and desires could foster the following:

“My friend Mary is so grateful that her mother, Sarah, appointed a Health Care Proxy and talked openly about what she wanted, if poor health ever kept her from speaking for herself. Sadly for everybody, that’s exactly what happened in the last months. Mary’s brother was the Proxy, and the doctors turned to him for direction. Mary’s whole family rallied around him because they knew he was doing what their mom wanted. What their mom did for herself was really a gift to her family. When the end came, they were able to rest easy that what their mom had wanted had been done, even though losing her was very hard. Without Sarah’s planning, I don’t think they would have been able to cope with the circumstances.”

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