

# Serious Illness Conversation Guide

## CONVERSATION FLOW

## PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

### 1. *Set up the conversation*

- Introduce purpose
- Prepare for future decisions
- Ask permission

“I’d like to talk about what is ahead with your illness and do some thinking in advance about what is important to you so that I can make sure we provide you with the care you want — **is this okay?**”

### 2. *Assess understanding and preferences*

“What is your **understanding** now of where you are with your illness?”

“How much **information** about what is likely to be ahead with your illness would you like from me?”

### 3. *Share prognosis*

- Share prognosis
- Frame as a “wish...worry”, “hope...worry” statement
- Allow silence, explore emotion

“I want to share with you **my understanding** of where things are with your illness...”

*Uncertain:* “It can be difficult to predict what will happen with your illness. I **hope** you will continue to live well for a long time but I’m **worried** that you could get sick quickly, and I think it is important to prepare for that possibility.”  
OR

*Time:* “I **wish** we were not in this situation, but I am **worried** that time may be as short as \_\_\_\_ (*express as a range, e.g. days to weeks, weeks to months, months to a year*).”  
OR

*Function:* “I **hope** that this is not the case, but I’m **worried** that this may be as strong as you will feel, and things are likely to get more difficult.”

### 4. *Explore key topics*

- Goals
- Fears and worries
- Sources of strength
- Critical abilities
- Tradeoffs
- Family

“What are your most important **goals** if your health situation worsens?”

“What are your biggest **fears and worries** about the future with your health?”

“What gives you **strength** as you think about the future with your illness?”

“What **abilities** are so critical to your life that you can’t imagine living without them?”

“If you become sicker, **how much are you willing to go through** for the possibility of gaining more time?”

“How much does your **family** know about your priorities and wishes?”

### 5. *Close the conversation*

- Summarize
- Make a recommendation
- Check in with patient
- Affirm commitment

“I’ve heard you say that \_\_\_\_ is really important to you. Keeping that in mind, and what we know about your illness, I **recommend** that we \_\_\_\_\_. This will help us make sure that your treatment plans reflect what’s important to you.”

“How does this plan seem to you?”

“I will do everything I can to help you through this.”

### 6. *Document your conversation*

### 7. *Communicate with key clinicians*

## Serious Illness Conversation Guide with Substitute Decision Maker

Conversation Flow	Suggested Language
1. <b>Set Up</b>	<p>I would like to talk about what is ahead with your [relative/friend]'s health and what would be important to them, is this okay?</p> <p>Are there others you feel should be involved in this conversation? (if Yes: When would be a good time to discuss this?)</p>
2. <b>Assess</b>	<p>What is your understanding of your [relative/friend's] health?</p> <p>What changes have you observed with your [relative/friend] over the past [e.g. 3 to 6 months]?</p> <p>Has anyone talked with you about what to expect?</p>
3. <b>Share concern/prognosis</b>	<p>I would like to share with you my understanding of where things are at.</p> <p>I see that your [relative/friend] is becoming weaker over time (<i>give examples such as staying in bed more, not participating in activities, or eating less</i>). It can be difficult to predict exactly what will happen and when. Generally, for someone with your [relative/friend] condition(s), we can expect [describe trajectory] over the coming months.</p> <p><b>OR:</b> Each time your [relative/friend] becomes sick (<i>e.g. goes to the hospital/has another bad infection</i>), they don't seem recover as well/end up weaker and more frail than before.</p> <p><b>OR:</b> I <b>hope</b> this is not the case, but I'm <b>worried</b> that this may be as strong as your [relative/friend] feels and things are likely to get more difficult for them.</p> <p><b>OR:</b> I <b>wish</b> we were not in this situation, but I <b>worry</b> that your [relative/friend] may be nearing the end of their life (<i>days/weeks/short months</i>)</p>
4. <b>Explore</b>	<p>I would like to understand a bit more about your [relative/friend's] values and beliefs and what has given their life meaning...</p> <p>If your [relative/friend] could express their wishes and make their own care decisions, what would your [relative/friend] say was most important to them? (Attempt to understand the values and beliefs of both the client and the SDM.)</p> <p>What might your [relative/friend's] <b>biggest fears and worries be</b>? What are your <b>biggest worries or fears</b> for your [relative/friend]?</p> <p>If your [relative/friend] became sicker, <b>how much would they be willing to go through</b> for the possibility of gaining more time?</p> <p>Has your [relative/friend] spent any time in hospital? How did they seem to feel about being there?</p> <p>What is <b>most important to you</b> for your [relative/friend]?</p> <p>Do you have any other <b>hopes</b> for your [relative/friend]?</p>
5. <b>Summarize</b>	<p><b>So, I've heard you say that</b> (<i>summarize important points</i>) ..... <b>Does this sound right?</b></p> <p>Based on what you've said, I <b>recommend</b> that we .....</p> <p>How does this plan sound to you?</p> <p><b>We will do everything we can to support your [relative/friend] and you through this.</b></p>