

Talking about dying

Helping with difficult conversations





Why is it important to talk about dying?

Most of us will have a view on how we want to be cared for at the end of our lives. Top of most people's list is to be free from physical pain but there are all sorts of other things that can make a difference to a person's experience of dying. These could be practical, about where they want to be or who they'd like to see. Or, they could be things to talk about, God, faith, hopes or fears.

If no-one asks, they might not receive the care they would like and in turn, their death may not reflect their last wishes. That's why it's important to give everyone the opportunity, while they are still able to and if they would like to, to talk about dying.

Why is it often difficult?

The reasons people give for not wanting to have the conversation are varied but the most common ones include:

- Fear of upsetting the older person
- Fear of saying the wrong thing
- Fear of our own death
- Fear of raising emotions that will be difficult to hear
- Worrying that we may not hold the same views on God, life after death, or other questions of faith
- We might not be able to answer the person's questions



The most important thing is to be there to listen and allow the person to express their thoughts and emotions, even if that's difficult to witness. Also, don't be afraid to say if you don't know something or are unable to answer a difficult question.

What should I ask?

Try to ask open questions that show the person you're ready to listen if they want to talk. It's also important to accept that this might not be the right time or you might not be the right person.

Questions you could use:

- If you become seriously ill, who would you want to know?
- What would you like to talk about?
- What are you afraid of?
- Is there anyone in particular you would like to see?
- How are you feeling about God at the moment?
- Would you like me to say a prayer, here or when I get home?
- Is there anything in particular you would like me to pray about?
- Are you getting all the help you need?
- What's important for you when you're feeling really poorly?
- What might be important for you when you're coming to the end of your life?
- Have you thought about what you would like for your funeral?

What should I avoid?

Staying away

Being afraid of silence

Changing the subject if they want to talk about death

Taking over the decision making

Missing opportunities to express love or say goodbye

Don't avoid talking about the past



A good death?

If the person expresses any practical wishes (people they want to be with, hymns for the funeral, playing Radio 4 etc.), take a note of their wishes and pass them on to the family or care staff.

Being at peace with oneself and those dearest to us will play a huge part in achieving a good death, there are four things that we can say that will make this more likely:

Please forgive me

I forgive you

Thank you

I love you

(‘The four things that matter most’ Ira Byock MD, palliative care doctor)

If you can help someone to think about how they might say these things to the people who matter most to them then you will have made a great difference to their dying.

Some simple prayers

Gracious God, we bring before you all our thoughts and words of this conversation today. We ask you to bless us and hold us in your love. Amen.

N, may the Spirit of the living God, present with us now, bring you peace in body, mind and spirit.
And may you know that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well, this *day/night* and always. Amen.

May the love of Christ grant to you a quiet mind,
the Spirit strengthen you in all goodness,
and may you live in the blessing of God's pardon and peace,
from this day forth and for evermore.
Amen.

Loving Father, thank you for the place prepared for us in heaven.
N is now ready to take up that place and so we release *N* to that eternal home.
In the name of Jesus, Amen.
Safe journey, dear friend.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Remember as you say goodbye, whether for this time or forever, it means “God be with you”.

If you're interested in thinking more about having conversations around death and dying, enquire about our Last Taboo workshops: **chaplaincy@mha.org.uk**

For further reading: 'Listen: How to find the words for tender conversations' by Kathryn Mannix



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