

Do...

...remember that we are all dying. Conversations about dying can be two way, with both participants talking about plans, memories, fears and hopes for their own death and after.

Don't...

...fill silences: gaps in conversations can provide people with the opportunity to bring up subjects that are important to them.

Try...

"How do you feel about your situation at the moment?"

"What would you like to talk about?"

"I know these are difficult things to talk about..."

"Is there anything you want us to know...?"

"How do you feel you're progressing?"

"What do you hope for in the next few weeks?"

Remember...

You can address the subject of dying without destroying hope. It's important to be realistic but also positive about final days, the future and the things that matter most. The conversation is about doing the best for the person who is dying, and helping them do the best for the people they leave behind.

"As a family, we never really addressed the fact that my son was dying. We were all in different stages of denial. He had suggested to us he had specific wishes about how he'd like to die, but because we kept on having to believe there was a chance of survival, we didn't discuss them until it was too late."

Someone close to you is dying.

It may be days away, weeks or months. But time is running out to say what you want to say, or to find out what the person wants from their remaining days. You don't know how they'd feel about receiving further treatments, or about going into a hospital or hospice. You're not even sure they've made a will, or where you'd find it.

Raising the subject seems impossibly difficult. How can you begin to talk about such things when time is precious, and there's a chance you'll make a stressful time worse? The last thing you want to do is hurt them.

But there are things you can do.

To find out how to get more help visit:
www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk
or call 0131 229 0538



Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief is working to make Scotland a place where there is more openness about death, dying and bereavement so that:

- People are aware of ways to live with death, dying and bereavement
- People feel better equipped to support each other through the difficult times that can come with death, dying and bereavement

We are interested to hear from any person or organisation who wants to work with us to make Scotland a place where people can be open about death, dying and bereavement.



Remember when we...

#6

Starting the conversation if someone close to you is dying

Why we need to talk about death and dying

It's unfortunately true that some people don't die as they might have wished to. They may not have left a will, or expressed wishes about their funeral, care arrangements for dependents, or donating organs. Or they may simply not have said what they wanted to say.

This isn't just sad for the person dying. For those left, there may be difficult loose ends to tie up, and sadness and regrets that can live on for a long time. It's in everyone's interests to deal with these subjects, and to talk about the practicalities and emotions surrounding dying, whether it be years or days away.

The process isn't easy. It involves facing an uncertain future, accepting that things are coming to an end, and acknowledging strong emotions like love and fear.

But it can bring you closer, and families commonly report a sense of relief once dying is brought out into the open. Often the person who is ill or dying wants to talk openly as well, but they too have avoided the subject because they want to protect those close to them, or don't know where to start.

Some people never want to talk about these things, and if that's the case, then we have to respect that.

But we'll never really know until we try to raise the subject. There is no right way and wrong way to do this: it will come down to your characteristics and those of the person close to you.

Subjects you might need to talk about

In the checklist below are some of the areas that people can leave it too late to discuss. Some of these may be more important to you than others. If you want to know more about any of these areas, then go to the Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief website www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk

- The type of care someone would like towards the end of their life
- Where they'd like to die
- Funeral arrangements
- Care of dependents
- Organ donation
- How they'd like to be remembered
- Whether they have any particular worries they'd like to discuss about being ill and dying
- What they'd like people to know before they die

"It was very hard to talk about the end of his life because my husband was a very proud man. But we sat down, and faced the fact that this was it. It was tough, but it was also very emotionally helpful. And in the end, there weren't any surprises – he died as he wanted to."

Principles to bear in mind

- It's generally true that, in the long run, you hurt people more by the conversations you don't have than by the conversations you do have.
- It's quite likely that the other person has been thinking about these subjects for a long time – they just haven't shown it.
- Sometimes talking about important subjects like this needs more than one "cover all" conversation – it can be many small ones. You need to go at the other person's pace.
- If you're worried about getting it wrong with someone you love, you can always discuss what to do with someone else you respect and trust – a nurse or close friend, for example.

Starting the conversation

- Choose the right place, and the right time. No one finds it easy to talk when they're feeling particularly stressed.
- If there's time, it's best to wait until there is an obvious indication from the other person that they want to talk.
- But when time is short, you may need to raise the subject directly. You needn't be harsh or abrupt. You can be honest and acknowledge the difficulty: "I know talking about these things is never easy."
- One good way to provide an opening is to ask the person how they feel about their illness, or their progress, and what they hope for in the next few weeks.
- Try and be honest and personal from the start. It can help if you make it clear why talking about this subject is important to you.
- If the other person clearly doesn't want to talk, or openly face the fact that they are going to die, you do have to respect that. On the other hand, your attempts may have got the ball rolling, and the other person may indicate they want to talk at a later stage.

During the conversation

- Let people feel free to express any anxieties they have, and don't worry if you or the other person gets emotional. It's easy to stick to the practicalities to avoid upsetting areas, but doing this can mean that the things that matter most don't get aired.
- Avoid making the other person follow your agenda for the conversation – it's more a matter of providing obvious opportunities for them to open up.
- If you ask questions, try keeping them open: "Is there anything you want us to know...?" rather than "What have you done about a will?" You may find subjects arise without asking directly.
- If general questions don't work, and time is short, you may need to be more specific.
- Be honest about your feelings.

Keeping the conversation going

- Once you've got started on talking about the future, try and make sure you don't close the conversation down straight away.
- Listen to the other person, and show you are listening, for example by nodding your head.
- Try not to interrupt.
- Don't change the subject if you think things are getting difficult, but acknowledge the difficulty.
- It's good to be reassuring, but you can overdo it. Trying to rescue someone with comforting words can make it harder for them to say what they want to say. For example, if you say "Don't worry", it might stop the other person from talking and being open about anxieties.