



How Do I Talk To My Loved One About Hospice?



Hospice Begins With A Conversation: Are You Ready?

You're thinking about having the *talk*. You want to help to someone you love decide if hospice is a good next-step. Maybe you're nervous about starting the conversation. After all, the topic is life and death. What could be more important—or more emotional?

Take heart. With a little information and some time to organize your thoughts, you'll have everything you need.

This. Talk. Matters.

3 Reasons Why:

- 1. Hospice care greatly enriches life.** Your loved one may not be considering hospice as an option because they don't understand it. They picture it as giving up—they see it as the care they get in their very final days. By starting the conversation, you can help them see the many ways that hospice gives them a fuller, more meaningful life. Every day of their life.
- 2. Sooner is better than later.** Starting hospice early allows your loved one to benefit more deeply. They can start to feel physically better. They have more time to build strong, trusting relationships with their hospice team, which can make a profound difference in their experience. Less stressed, they can focus on doing what they love most in life.
- 3. You may be giving your loved one a chance to open up.** Even if you don't feel quite ready, they may be wanting to talk. Maybe they're hoping you'll start the conversation. Just as these discussions are hard for you, they may be overwhelming for the person facing the end of their life. They may be worried about burdening you with their fears and wishes. Starting the hospice conversation shows that you're walking with them on their journey, and you're strong enough to support them.

"Life is what you celebrate. All of it. Even the end." – Joanne Harris

The WHEN Is Now. But What's the HOW?

There's no *right* way to begin the hospice conversation. That said, following a few suggestions will make it more comfortable—and more meaningful—for you, your loved one, and your whole family.



Before You Begin

- **Educate yourself about hospice.** You don't have to be an expert, but the more you know about hospice care, the more prepared you'll be to help your loved one make the best decision. Search online for "benefits of hospice care."

Also, these resources may deepen your understanding and offer some guidance:

- PBS documentary '[Being Mortal](#)' - a PBS documentary on caring for the dying
 - '[Dying in America](#)' - a multimedia documentary by nurses and medical professionals on preparing for difficult end-of-life decisions
 - '[Death over Dinner](#)' - an empowering, interactive experience focused on normalizing discussions about dying.
- **Look for an opening.** Once you feel ready to have the talk, stay alert to comments from your loved one that give you a natural transition into bringing up hospice, such as:
 - Concerns about their illness
 - Being tired of trips to the hospital
 - Wishing they were more comfortable
 - **Pick a peaceful place.** You'll want to have the conversation somewhere quiet, with no distractions and comfortable seating.

Types of Conversation Starters: Situation Where Hospice Shines

“These hospital stays (or trips to the ER) are pretty hard on you—and us too. I have an idea on how to stop them and manage your care at home...”

“I’ve been thinking... You only have so much energy these days. Do you want to spend it by going to doctor appointments, or on activities that make you happy...?”

“You don’t have to be in pain anymore...”

“It seems like you’re having more trouble walking, eating, and breathing...”

Talk A Little. Listen A Lot.

This above all else.

You’re braving the difficult conversation because you want your loved one to live their best life, right? To know what will make them happy, you’ll need to hear what’s troubling them. And what their wishes are.

Help them express themselves. Embrace what they tell you. Make sure they feel heard. Along the way, offer what wisdom you can.

Your goal is to make them feel supported. Less fearful. Empowered. Armed with information. And open to the idea of hospice in their future.

Trust Your Instincts. Let your conversation unfold in the way that feels right. Stay in the moment, always aware of how your words are making your loved one feel. However, if you’re looking for more tips and a broad overview of one possible path your talk might take, read on!

Tips For The Talk: *Before* You Mention Hospice

- Acknowledge that your loved one has been through a lot lately.
- Ask them how they'd describe what's going on with their health.
- If they're struggling with a devastating diagnosis, ask them what they'd like to do. (Get a second opinion? Take one last family vacation?). Assure them you'll do your best to make it happen.
- Encourage them to describe how they'd like their future to look: What are their hopes? Concerns? Questions?
- One of their hopes, concerns, or questions may give you a smooth transition into mentioning hospice (teeing-up a conversation starter from Page Two).
- If not, consider *describing* hospice before you actually say the word.

"I want to talk to you about a service that can control your pain, help you have more energy, and relieve some of your stress so you can spend more time with the family or do other things you love to do."

Tips For The Talk: *After* You Mention Hospice

- Lots of people have an outdated impression of hospice—associating it with the very end of life. They don't feel ready for hospice yet, so they shut down the whole idea.
- As soon as you bring up the word *hospice*, you might want to explain that:
 - You know the "H" word is scary.
 - But hospice care has changed a lot over the years.
 - The focus isn't on dying—it's on helping you make the most of your life.
 - And that's why you might want to take advantage of their services early on.

- You don't have to commit to hospice forever. You can go off hospice care if your needs or wishes change.
- Describe highlights of hospice care your loved one might be interested in, such as:
 - A nurse who knows you and your family personally will be available, even if it's at 3:00 in the morning when you call.
 - If you have an urgent need, help will likely be there within the hour.
 - You have experts to talk openly with about any fears or questions.
 - Your hospice team is there to relieve your stress and make life more enjoyable. (e.g. If you want to take a trip, they'll help coordinate the medical and logistical details to make this happen.)
 - Your hospice team can facilitate difficult conversations for you and your family (e.g. making amends, saying goodbye, coping with grief).
- Make sure your loved one understands that they're in charge. It's their life. You're just here for them on their journey.
- Ask them if they'd be open to having a hospice team member come talk to the family—only to describe their services and answer questions.

Or...Consider Another Great Approach

Bring a Doctor into the Conversation

If your loved one has a doctor they trust, you may want to start there. It's easier for some people to talk to medical experts than family members—at least at first.

1. Call the doctor in advance. (You may decide to begin with the doctor's nurse, if you want their insights on how to talk with the physician.)
2. Let the doctor know that they've done a great job treating your loved one, but you're wondering if it's time to suggest hospice care. Ask what their thoughts are.

3. If you feel the doctor could be helpful in a discussion about hospice, set up a consultation for you and your loved one. If you want the doctor to be the one to open the door to the idea of hospice during that meeting, let them know in advance.
4. If your loved one doesn't fully believe or understand that they're dying, this is also a good opportunity to have their doctor tell them kindly and clearly. You'll be on hand to help ask questions.

IMPORTANT TO NOTE: Not all doctors are knowledgeable about hospice. And some are not confident recommending it. If you're not comfortable with the doctor's position on hospice for your loved one, consider reaching out to a geriatrician.

Can You Ease Their Way?

Supporting Your Loved One Through Your Talk

Big Picture: This conversation is opening the door to a meaningful late-life experience for someone you love.

In the Moment: The discussion may feel emotionally overwhelming for them.

You can help them through it.

- Let your body language and voice show your love. If you think it may comfort your loved one, hold their hand.
- Acknowledge the elephant in the room. Neither one of you has talked about the specifics of your loved one's future yet. Tell them you realize how uncomfortable this conversation might be for both of you, but it also feels really important.
- This is redundant but bears repeating: *Listen more than you talk.*
- Resist the urge to fill the silence. Your loved one is grappling with questions that take time to process. Give them space to do that.



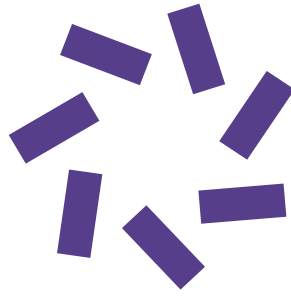
- Ask open-ended questions (not yes/no questions).
- If their answers are vague or short, encourage them to elaborate, but don't push too hard.
- Prepare yourself to accept whatever you might hear. Your loved one may talk more frankly than you'd expect.
- If you're surprised by something they say, don't feel the need to respond immediately. This is just the first talk. There will be others. Give yourself time to think it through.
- Be prepared for tears. Have tissues handy.

Closing Thoughts

The conversation won't be perfect. And it may be hard. But it's an incredible way to make a big difference for a person you love.

Remember:

- Hospice can bring great comfort to your whole family. The right kind of end-of-life care can turn your saddest days into joyful, meaningful memories.
- Having the conversation early will help your loved one stay independent as long as possible.
- It's easier to have a vital talk like this *before* a crisis happens instead of *during* one.
- You won't want your loved one to miss out on the comfort and peace that hospice brings. So have the conversation as early as possible to give them the richest experience.



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