

Blueprint for End-of-Life Conversations

Use this blueprint to help you create a script for an end-of-life conversation with a loved one, friend, patient, or client.

Step 1: Prepare

1. What is your goal for the conversation? What do you want to have accomplished at the end?
2. What biases do you have toward the other person? – toward the subject matter?
3. What emotions are you feeling about the conversation? What are your trigger points?
4. What is your attitude toward the conversation? Do you feel positive or negative about it?

Step 2: Adjust Your Mindset

1. Let go of the outcome. What will it take for you to be comfortable just having a conversation and gathering information rather than trying to push toward a certain answer?
2. Give up being the expert or teacher. How can you play the role of a “student” in this conversation?
3. Don’t take anything personally. How can you protect yourself from being triggered by the other person?
4. Find compassion for the other person in the conversation. What motivates them? What fears do they have?
5. Stay centered and calm. What practices (e.g. deep breathing or mindfulness) help you stay calm during trying situations?

Step 3: Set the Scene

1. Who should be present for the conversation? Just 2 of you or the entire family?

2. Where should it take place? (Ideally in a quiet, comfortable location that is relatively free of distractions)
3. How should you be seated in the room? (Maximize eye contact by sitting directly in front of one another or allow looking away by sitting at the corner of a table or in a circle for a group)
4. How much time do you need?

Step 4: Tools – How might you use each of these during the discussion?

1. “Zooming in” to a narrow focus or “zooming out” to a bigger picture view
2. Clarifying questions – keep asking non-confrontational questions until you get enough information to have a clear picture of your loved one’s feelings
3. Relating – describing how you too have had a similar experience or feeling
4. Reflecting – repeat back what the other person has said to make sure you heard it clearly and to allow them to hear it in your words
5. Reframing – take a new perspective on the issue by looking at it from a different point of view; help your loved one see a new perspective by zooming out or shifting
6. Storytelling – bring your own stories you can tell to help move the conversation forward
7. Re-centering – know how to get yourself back to a calm place after your emotions have been triggered. What helps you?

Step 5: Structure the Conversation

1. Introduction

- a. Ask a question (e.g. What was it like for you when a loved one died?)
- b. Tell your own story (e.g. about completing your own advance directive)

- c. Watch a movie together and ask natural questions after (e.g. what's on your bucket list? Or what would you do if you had one year to live?)

- d. Ask for help (e.g. I need information to help me know what you would like if you aren't able to talk for yourself. Will you help me with that?)

2. Build understanding

- a. Ask clarifying questions
- b. Acknowledge their perspective
- c. Use relating and reflecting comments
- d. What stories or experiences can you share?

3. Express your concerns – why is this conversation important to you?

4. Agree to get more information now or later – what information do you need to move the conversation forward?

5. Conclusion

- a. Express gratitude – how has this conversation helped you?

- b. Ask permission to talk again – when do you want to follow up and what do you want to discuss the next time?

- c. Show your love – how will you leave this person knowing they are loved by you?