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## Discussing death before facing it

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**I**n life, we all have so many responsibilities to plan for and think about, be it family or friends, work or home. We tend not to have time for planning for and thinking about the other end of the spectrum — death. We put it off. It's too gloom and doom, too unfathomable, too unnecessary a notion to deal with right away.

But, to be honest, it's inevitable.

Planning ahead for this ensures your end-of-life health care preferences are honored. Not considering, documenting and communicating your wishes in advance could put a huge strain on family, friends and caregivers to make decisions on your behalf that could ultimately go against your wishes.

Take a moment to think about what you want at the end of your life. It's a sensitive topic, but one that needs thought well before it's imminent to avoid having to make decisions then or leave them up to loved ones during a crisis. It's important to ask yourself questions like these:

- ▶ How long would you want to receive medical care? Would you want to live as long as possible no matter what type of intervention, or opt for quality of life over quantity?

- ▶ At what point would you want to discontinue, if at all, aggressive treatments, and start palliative or hospice care? Palliative care provides symptom management and support throughout chronic or terminal illnesses, and hospice care assists patients during the final months of life.

- ▶ Do you want your loved ones to do exactly what you've said you wanted, even if it makes them uncomfortable? Or, do you want them to do what brings them peace, even if it goes against what you've communicated to them about your wishes?

- ▶ When the time comes, where do you want to be? At home or in a nursing-care facility? Alone or surrounded by your loved ones?

- ▶ Should you ever become seriously ill and unable to make your own health-care decisions, who would you like to make decisions on your behalf? You should name this person as your health care proxy.

- ▶ Is there anything you consider worse than death? For instance, aggressive treatments such as resuscitation if your

heart stops; a persistent vegetative state; long-term need of a breathing machine or feeding tube.

These questions can be difficult, but communicating your thoughts may be easier if written down. Questions like these and others are available in the Conversation Starter Kit, a workbook that can get you thinking about your wishes, which can be downloaded and printed from Sturdy Memorial Hospital's website. The kit is provided by The Conversation Project, a public engagement campaign dedicated to helping people make sure their end-of-life care wishes are expressed and respected.

Once you have made decisions, you should document them in writing. Fill out a Massachusetts Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (MOLST) form, which is a Massachusetts Department of Public Health-approved standardized medical order form. Also, fill out a health care-proxy form to designate someone you trust to make health decisions for you if you are unable to do so. These forms are also available on Sturdy's website.

Next, wishes should be shared with loved ones. Think of a good time to talk, and where the best place would be to have the discussion. Perhaps the more comfortable the setting, the easier to discuss this sensitive issue. Striking up the conversation can be difficult, too. The following are icebreakers you could use:

- ▶ "I'm OK health-wise right now, but you never know what could happen. I want to be prepared."

- ▶ "I was thinking about what happened to Bob or Sally, and it made me realize that that was what I would consider a 'good' death. Here's why."

- ▶ "I just sat down and answered some questions about my end-of-life health care preferences. I'd like to share my answers with you."

Recognizing and communicating your end-of-life preferences can take time, and more than a single conversation, but starting now is key to navigating any disease course with more comfort, compassion and dignity.

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