

Serious Illness Conversation Primer

PROMOTING EQUITABLE ENGAGEMENT IN SERIOUS ILLNESS CONVERSATIONS

REFLECT: On our biases and values that influence SIC

Consider Your Biases/Values	Ask yourself, <i>“Is there anything about this person or situation that might influence how I share information or care options? Are there any care options that, if chosen, might cause me to react (for example, a treatment that I would not choose for myself)?”</i>
Approach with Humility	When people express values different than your own or take longer to decide, remain open and curious to contribute to micro trust-building moments. Different aspects of identity, culture, lived experience, and role within current systems of power and oppression may impact their care preferences.
Share Values-Neutral Information	Quality of life is subjective and often related to personal values and baseline function. Rather than asserting quality of life, allow people to share their thoughts after receiving information about their health. For example: ✗ <i>“The imaging shows that the weakness was caused by a large stroke. What this means is that your quality of life will be poor moving forward.”</i> ✓ <i>“The imaging shows that the weakness was caused by a large stroke. What this means is that it is unlikely that you will regain the ability to move that side of your body.”</i>

LEARN: And build trust early before engaging in a SIC

Build Rapport	<i>“I’d love to learn more about you as a person, and the important people in your life.”</i>	It is trust-building to learn more about a person and their world.
Assess Communication Preferences	<i>“When you have conversations about your health, do you prefer to be alone, with someone, or do you prefer to have someone else receive information and make medical decisions for you?”</i> <i>“When you receive medical information, do you generally prefer all the details and numbers, the big picture, or both?”</i>	People differ in when and how they like to receive information and make decisions, and some may have more collective/relational preferences.
Explore Prior Experiences	<i>“Have you had experiences either yourself or with friends or family who have been very sick? (If yes) How has that impacted your thoughts on your own care?”</i>	Prior experience with illness, advance care planning, and the healthcare system might influence communication and care preferences.

APPLY: Additional trust-building techniques

Support/Partnership	<i>“I would like to talk together...”</i> <i>“We will do everything we can to support you through this and to help you to get the best care possible.”</i>	Contribute to micro trust-building moments by explicitly (and authentically) partnering throughout the conversation.
Ask Permission	<i>“Would this be okay?”</i>	This hands over some control and agency in a conversation with a significant power dynamic.
Allow Multiple Opportunities for Questions	<i>“What other questions do you have?”</i> <i>“That was a lot of information. What part do you want to go over again?”</i>	Not everyone feels empowered to ask questions during SIC and benefit from a deliberate effort to normalize asking them.

BEFORE

Review this tool for early and iterative conversations with people facing life-changing illness or age-related conditions.



DURING

Use skills that help people to feel seen and heard.

ACKNOWLEDGE EMOTION throughout the conversation

NURSE **Name:** "This sounds frustrating"
Understand: "I can only imagine how hard this has been"
Respect: "I can see how hard you've worked"
Support: "Our team is here to support you through this"
Explore: "Tell me more about that"

I WISH "I wish we had better news"

SILENCE Allows time for processing

SHOW YOU ARE LISTENING to important values

REFLECT-BACK VALUES "It sounds like [value] is very important to you"

EXPAND VALUES "What else [is important]?"

BOOKMARK "It sounds like [concern] is an important concern. I'm going to make a note so we can come back to it."

GRATITUDE "Thank you so much for sharing this with me"



AFTER

Document your conversation in the EPIC ACP module so all team members can see and build on it.

Serious Illness Conversation Guide

ADAPTED WITH PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

SET UP

"I would like to **talk together** about what's happening with your health and **what matters to you**. Would this be okay?"

ASSESS

"To make sure I share information that's helpful to you, can you tell me **your understanding** of what's happening with your health now?"

"How are you doing with all of this?"

"Is there **particular information about what might be ahead** with your health that would be helpful to discuss today?"

SHARE

"Can I share **my understanding of what may be ahead** with your health?"

Function: "It can be difficult to predict what will happen. **I hope you will feel as well as possible** for a long time, and we will work toward that. **It's also possible that the decline we have seen is going to continue and it may get harder to do things** (consider tailoring to anticipated health trajectory)." (Pause and allow silence.)
OR

Uncertain: "It can be difficult to predict what will happen. **I hope you will feel as well as possible** for a long time, and we will work toward that. **It's also possible that you could get sick quickly** (please tailor further to anticipated health trajectory or use the best case-worst case-most likely framework)." (Pause and allow silence.)
OR

Time: "It can be difficult to predict what will happen. **Some people find it helpful to hear what to expect** in terms of time. **Would that be helpful for you?**" (Only if yes) "**I hope you will feel as well as possible** for as long as possible, and we also worry that time could be as short as (give as a range, e.g., days to weeks, weeks to months, months to years)." (Pause and allow silence.)

Pause: Allow time to process and acknowledge emotion (see side bar for ways to facilitate this).

EXPLORE

"Would it be okay if I ask some questions to learn more about what **matters to you?**"

"Given what I just shared about your health, what is **most important** to you moving forward?"

"What are some things you are **worried** about?"

"What are some things that bring **joy or meaning** to your life?"

"What gives you **strength or support** in your life?"

"I appreciate you sharing all of these important things with me. How much do the **people closest to you** know about them?"

CLOSE

"I'm hearing you say that _____ are really important to you. Is it okay if I make a recommendation based on that?"

"Considering these important things and what we know about your health, I recommend that we _____. **How does this plan seem to you?**"

"**We will do everything we can** to support you through this and to help you to get the **best care possible.**"