

Starting the conversation

By: Amy Sobrino, MSW

Think about some of the most important conversations you've had in your life. Talking with your spouse about starting a family. Speaking with a potential employer in an interview for your dream job. Helping your child weigh the decision of what college to attend. Everyone's list of meaningful conversations looks a little bit different, but they should all have at least one similar feature – a conversation with a loved one about advanced planning. Advanced planning includes making decisions that you might include in a living will or advance directive – decisions that would help guide your family, friends, or any loved one as to what your wishes are in the event of accident, illness, or end of life.

Advanced planning discussions can range from a variety of topics, from how I would like my pillows arranged if I couldn't do it myself or if I would want a ventilator to stay alive if my body could not keep me going on its own. If the thought of discussing these topics with your loved ones makes you nervous, don't worry – you're not alone. Many people may have certain wishes for care in illness, accident, or end of life, but simply never discuss it because it can make people uncomfortable. Unfortunately, in fear of being uncomfortable, many families miss out on the opportunity to really use advanced planning as it was intended – to reduce a family's stress in future healthcare situations by ensuring that important decisions about a loved one's care and wishes will be honored.

I recently brought up the conversation of advanced planning with my husband. After I had discussed certain wishes for my own care, my husband first said that he thought I would make the ‘right decision’ whenever the time came. I pressed for more information about what he thought about different topics, and he slowly realized, how could I be prepared, when the time comes, to adequately carry out his wishes if I didn’t know myself what they were? It is difficult to be prepared in every situation, but knowing things like what quality of life my husband would want, and if that included life on a ventilator, feeding tube, etc. makes quite a bit of difference in setting me up for success in an already difficult situation.

Luckily, there are helpful tools for families to use in starting to have these important conversations. One of my favorites is called The Conversation Project. Their free booklet helps a person identify what is important to them in terms of their healthcare, well-being, and quality of life. It offers helpful questions to give individuals an idea on how they may feel on a particular topic, to jumpstart the conversation between family members. A free booklet and more information can be found at theconversationproject.org.

Benjamin Franklin said that there are only two certainties in life – death and taxes. Although we may not be able to choose how we go or when an accident or illness occurs, we do have the power to make choices about how we would like to be treated and cared for. After all, at the end of your life, who would know better than yourself how you would like to be treated?

For more information about Memory Moment & Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver and have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.