This guide offers clinicians language to talk to seriously ill patients about their goals, values, and wishes. The guide can help support more, better, and earlier conversations between clinicians and patients that can inform future care.

### CONVERSATION FLOW

1. **Set up the conversation**
   - Introduce purpose
   - Prepare for future decisions
   - Ask permission

2. **Assess understanding and preferences**
   - Ask questions and listen
   - Explore their understanding of illness progression
   - Consider acceptability of prognostic information

3. **Share prognosis**
   - Share prognosis
   - Frame as a “wish...worry”, “hope...worry” statement
   - Allow silence, explore emotion

4. **Explore key topics**
   - Goals
   - Fears and worries
   - Sources of strength
   - Critical abilities
   - Benefits and harms
   - Trade-offs
   - Family
   - Location of care

5. **Close the conversation**
   - Summarize
   - Make a recommendation
   - Check in with patient
   - Affirm commitment

6. **Document your conversation**

7. **Communicate with key clinicians**
PATIENT-TESTED LANGUAGE

SET UP

“I’d like to talk about what is ahead with your illness and do some thinking in advance about what is important to you so that I can make sure we provide you with the care you want and avoid treatments that cause more harm than good – is this okay?”

“What is your understanding now of where you are with your illness?”

“How much information about what is likely to be ahead with your illness would you like from me?”

“I want to share with you my understanding of where things are with your illness...”

Uncertain: “It can be difficult to predict what will happen with your illness. I hope you will continue to live well for a long time, but I’m worried that you could get sick quickly, and I think it is important to prepare for that possibility.” OR

Time: “I wish we were not in this situation, but I am worried that time may be as short as ______ (express as a range, e.g. days to weeks, weeks to months, months to a year).” OR

Function: “I hope that this is not the case, but I’m worried that this may be as strong as you will feel, and things are likely to get more difficult.”

SHARE

“What are your most important goals if your health situation worsens?”

“What are your biggest fears and worries about the future with your health?” (e.g. Struggling to breathe, being alone, depending entirely on others)

“What abilities are so critical to your life that you can’t imagine living without them?”

“What helps you through the tough times?”

“If you become sicker, how much are you willing to go through for the possibility of gaining more time?” (e.g. the ability to communicate, the ability to interact with others, the ability to control your bodily functions.)

“How much does your family know about your priorities and wishes?”

EXPLORE

“I’ve heard you say that _____ is really important to you. Keeping that in mind, and what we know about your illness, I recommend that we____. This will help us make sure that your treatment plans reflect what’s important to you.”

“How does this plan seem to you?”

“I will do everything I can to help you through this.”

CLOSE

This conversation guide was adapted from Ariadne Labs: A Joint Center for Health Systems Innovation (www.ariadnelabs.org) between Brigham and Women’s Hospital and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, in collaboration with Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Reviewers of this resource included Choosing Wisely Canada’s Serious Illness Working Group. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/