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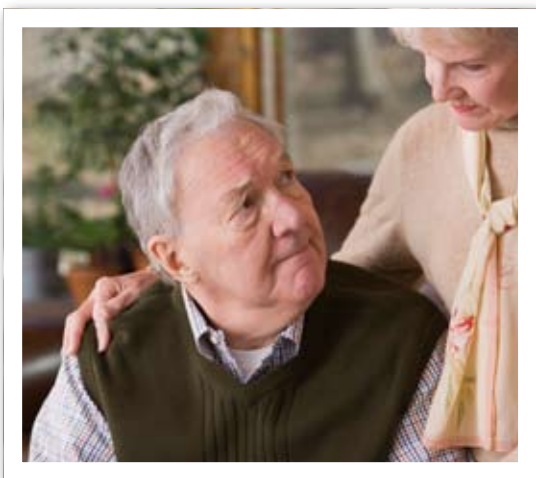


Speaking the Truth in Love

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Sometimes we are so busy trying to keep the bad things from happening, that we miss unbelievably rich opportunities to grow and embrace what's happening in our lives. When we step up to having really important conversations in the face of a terminal illness, everyone wins.

What are some of the things that those considering continuing medical treatment, or ending medical treatment, need in the face of the possible end of their life? Well, I'm not sure how it is for everyone, and I haven't experienced it myself, but there are many who have made this journey, many from whom we can learn.



When facing recurring cancer, for example, it isn't any easier to deal with than the first time. Common emotions people express are distress, self-doubt, anger and fatigue. The distress comes from the shock of it coming back when you moved on in your daily life. People often doubt the wisdom of their past treatment and the judgments they previously made. Anger is very common and reasonable. The anger may be toward the physician for not stopping the cancer the first time, or they may wonder why they put up with the treatment side effects just to have to deal with it again. Dealing with cancer again? That means fatigue! It means more fear, perhaps embarrassment. All these emotions are normal.

Opportunities for talking about these emotions and someone to help process decisions that need to be made is a gift. We often assume a person "doesn't want to talk about it" or that there is someone else supporting them. But unless we ask, "How can I be the best support to you right now?" we won't know.

People want to know, to be assured, that they have made a difference in the world and have opportunity to acknowledge that with someone. Asking, "What life events have

given you the most joy?" and even "What life events or decisions have caused you regret?" open doors for important processing. Another conversation starter would be, "What has given your life its purpose and meaning?"

In coming to terms with the end of one's life, forgiveness is often important. Asking, "How do you want to be remembered?" Or "Is there someone you want to forgive? What do you want to do

about that?" can open doors to healing.

Making end-of-life plans is very important. Consider these questions: Is there a final trip to visit family, friends or a special place that you want to go? What do you most value about your physical or mental well-being? Are there circumstances under which you would refuse or discontinue treatment that might prolong your life? How will others learn this? Who do you want to make your healthcare decisions for you if you are no longer able to do that?

A friend of mine once said, "We shouldn't ask people how they are unless we are willing to stay around and pick up the pieces." Asking the important questions, staying by and speaking the truth in love are priceless gifts we can offer.

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.

Suggested Resources

Caring Conversations: Making Your Wishes Known for End-of-Life Care. www.practicalbioethics.org

Five Wishes. www.agingwithdignity.org