

# End-of-Life Conversations

A Guide for  
Emmanuel Health Staff

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## Have you ever heard any of these phrases?

**"I want this to end."**

**"I wish I didn't have to be here anymore."**

**"Why won't God take me?"**

**"What can you tell me about Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)?"**

**Behind each of these phrases is a plea for recognition, listening, and support.**

The experiences of pain and suffering, dependence on others, or being away from home cause many people to reflect on their lives. This can lead to a search for meaning and to questions about what dying will look like. In Catholic health care, we remain committed to providing opportunities for people to explore their questions and to consider what living through their dying could look like.

This guide presents three alternative responses to moments in which patients, residents, and clients invite us to contemplate their end-of-life care with them.

All three alternatives are appropriate ways to accompany the people in our care. Which response you engage will depend on many factors including your profession, your role on your team, your personal values, and the other tasks you need to fulfill in a particular moment. As you discern which approach would be most appropriate for you, consider reaching out to your supervisor, colleagues, and others to reflect on your context.



**The following three scenarios are provided to help you discern how best to accompany the people in your care.**



## Recognize



***"I am so tired of being here,"***

Emma said softly to the environmental services worker, Joe, who was humming to himself while cleaning her room. Joe had a lot of other rooms to clean, and although he and Emma had had some good conversations in the past, he did not feel prepared to stay with Emma. How could Joe respond?

UNHELPFUL RESPONSES	HELPFUL RESPONSES
"Don't talk like that!"	Sitting down, even if only for a brief moment. This shows respect for what has been shared.
"You're telling the wrong person."	"What you just said sounds really important. Can I share it with a member of our team? I want to make sure you have a chance to receive the care you need."
"Have you heard of MAID?"	"It must be so hard to feel that way. Would you like me to find someone that you can talk to about what you're going through?"

There will be many moments when we realize that we are not the right person to respond to a patient, resident, or client's concerns. In these moments it is always important to acknowledge what they have shared, and to commit to finding someone who can engage in a deeper conversation with them. This can help them to feel recognized as a person.

*As you reflect on your professional practice, we invite you to consider...*

Many Christians share in a tradition of reflecting on the suffering of Jesus as he carried his cross. In one such moment, it is said that He met his Mother, Mary. How would Jesus have felt as she looked at him? She recognized Him as more than a criminal sent to His execution. She recognized Him for who He truly was. We are also called to recognize the people in our care as dignified human beings. How can we show this recognition to them, even in the briefest of encounters?



## Listen



**"I wish I didn't have to do this anymore,"**

**Felipe said to Irene as she finished setting up another dialysis treatment. Irene felt grateful that this comment came when she miraculously wasn't in a rush, so she sat down next to Felipe to try to understand what he meant. How could Irene respond?**

UNHELPFUL RESPONSES	HELPFUL RESPONSES
"Lots of people make this work. You can too!"	"You sound exhausted. Can you tell me more about how you're feeling?" "Have you been thinking about this for a while?"
"You just need to put your head down and keep going."	"How do you imagine your life would look if you didn't continue with this treatment?"
"I can't understand why you're receiving treatment at all."	"Those are heavy thoughts to be having. Have you mentioned this to your family or your physician?"

We may not always have answers when challenging questions come up, but we always have the ability to listen. In these moments, it is important to remember to stay focused on what the patient, resident, or client wants to share. It can be helpful to ask open ended questions that give them the opportunity to explore their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

*As you reflect on your professional practice, we invite you to consider...*

Many Christians share in a tradition of reflecting on the suffering of Jesus as he carried his cross. In one such moment, it is said that he met a woman named Veronica. Although she could do nothing to remove the cross from His shoulders, she stood next to Him and used her veil to wipe the sweat, blood and dirt from His face. How would Jesus have felt as she provided compassion in the only way she could? She was present for only a short time, but had a powerful impact on Jesus' journey. We are also called to listen to each other during moments of suffering. How can we listen to people when we know we cannot change what they are going through?



## Support



### **"I don't want to live like this,"**

**Nancy said to Joanna as her pain medications finally started to take effect. Joanna had been working with Nancy to get her pain under control for a number of days, and wanted a better outcome for her as well. She decided to sit down next to Nancy. How could Joanna respond?**

UNHELPFUL RESPONSES	HELPFUL RESPONSES
"You can do better than this."	"I want something more than this for you too. There are people who specialize in managing pain. Would you be interested in learning more about what they could do for you?"
"You'll feel better in the morning, I promise."	"As you think about what you want the next stage of your life to look like, do you think you have the information you need?"
"Why are you putting yourself through this?"	"What you are going through is so hard. I don't know anyone who can do it alone. Would you be interested in connecting with someone from spiritual care?"

Asking for support at the end-of-life is a vulnerable experience. In these moments, it is important to wrap around our patient, resident, or client by considering what resources they may need. This may include access to palliative care, spiritual care, social work or other team members. Conversations about Medical Assistance in Dying should be initiated and driven by the person receiving care. If you are uncertain about whether or not someone is asking about MAID, consider saying something like, "Can you help me understand - are you talking about MAID right now?"

### *As you reflect on your professional practice, we invite you to consider...*

Many Christians share in a tradition of reflecting on the suffering of Jesus as he carried his cross. In one such moment, it is said that he met a man named Simon of Cyrene. Simon did not know Jesus, but as Jesus struggled, the soldiers pulled Simon from the crowd and ordered him to help carry the cross. How would Jesus have felt as the cross lifted from His shoulders? Although Simon could not fulfill Jesus' mission, he played an important role in easing His burden. We are also called to ease the burdens of others. How can we support people as they complete their journey on earth?

