

Why It's Time To Talk About Advance Health Care Planning

By Jeanne West

There is nothing like an unusual situation to bring one to an awareness of important life issues. That might mean telling that person you love about the depth and sincerity of your love. Or, how about praising your child for being an excellent student, studying hard and getting exceptional grades. Perhaps an even more timely subject that comes to mind right now in the age of Covid-19, is taking precautions to observe safe distancing, getting enough exercise and having or re-visiting important conversations about what to do if ... or when a medical emergency happens to you or a loved one. This is an excellent opportunity to bring up the difficult but critical conversation about health care wishes with a loved one. This is a subject for all adults, regardless of age.

When the coronavirus reached public awareness several months ago, the underlying thought was that it seemed like a very bad case of the flu. Months later, we see that this pandemic has reached epic proportions in the numbers affected, the severity of symptoms and unprecedented resultant deaths. The illness, while originally deemed to be a threat mainly to seniors, has proven to affect every age group in our society.

The topic of Advance Health Care Planning could not be more timely. It may seem uncomfortable to bring up the subject of end-of-life care choices with family, yet it is probably more important now than ever before, that we have this serious conversation. It does not have to be a scary experience, if one is prepared and thoughtful about how the subject is introduced and discussion is pursued. For example, something as simple as "I was thinking about how suddenly Sherry got so severely ill – her family had to make difficult decisions and they had no idea what Sherry would have wanted them to do."

Another good example to break the ice of a serious conversation might be to give the analogy of the parent telling the child what to do if there is a fire in the house. Of course, the parent would give directions about specific actions to take in such an event, rather than saying ... oh, let's not think about such a serious subject right now. Or, you're too young to be worried about what to do in an emergency.

Having the conversation about health care wishes is no different. Let's introduce the subject of Advance Health Care Directives as a way of preparing ahead of time, for those actions you want to be taken (or not) in the event of a sudden unexpected illness or medical emergency. Next, take follow-up measures to be sure that one's wishes are actually put in writing by completing the document. Make sure that your primary care physician is consulted and aware of your decision and is given a copy of the completed document.

To obtain more information about Advance Health Care Directives and to get a copy of the "My Care" document, go to mycare@sbch.org where the document can be found online. You can also obtain copies from Hospice of Santa Barbara (when the office re-opens) or many other health care organizations, FREE of charge. Special witnessing requirements must be followed for the document to be valid.

To learn more or to schedule a presentation about Advance Health Care Directives, contact Jeanne West at jwest@hospiceofsb.org.