

How do I start Life Planning?

Imagine...

Your life - past, present, and future – is a journey and every journey should begin with a plan.

It is never too late to plan for your health care choices.

Starting the plan begins by reflecting on your wishes, desires, and interests.

It starts with considering what is important to you to live well.

And remember, each of us is unique! My wishes may not match others' wishes.

Step one: Thinking and Reflecting

This initial step may take time, as it focuses on important concerns for each human being. Below are a few questions to consider as you define “living well” for yourself. You may even want to write down a few notes to refer to later.

- What does “living well” mean to you?
- What gives your life meaning? Joy? Peace? Contentment? Pleasure?
- What do you value most about your mental and physical health? How would you want to live well if one or both of these were to change for the worse?
- Technology in today’s world has progressed to the point that patients with little or no hope of recovery can be kept alive indefinitely. Consider being in the intensive care unit hooked up to machines to keep your heart and lungs going but with no hope of returning to the active person you used to be. Would you want treatments to continue in this condition?
- What type of care would you want in a health crisis?
- What type of care would you want with a long-term illness?
- Where do you want to be cared for? At home? In a nursing home? Elsewhere?
- Who would you choose to make decisions for you? Would you choose one person or two?
- Describe a circumstance where you would not be living well? For example, not being able to talk and understand conversations with loved ones might be a circumstance one would find not bearable.
- How will a serious illness impact or burden my family mentally, spiritually, and financially?

Step Two: Concerns you may want to discuss with your doctor.

Sometimes one is not aware of what health crises COULD happen. Your doctor can discuss possibilities with you to better prepare you. Part of being prepared is taking steps to prevent complications from occurring. For example, if you have high blood pressure, you could decrease your salt intake or if you have heart failure, you could weigh yourself every day and watch your intake of fluids.

Also, by knowing possible complications, you can be aware of the possible treatment options. For example, if you have lung cancer, you may choose to not be placed on a breathing machine but to have your breathing distress treated with medication.

Knowing what you want to live well is crucial to working with your doctor to make the health care decisions that are the BEST for you.

- Do I have any serious illnesses which could lead to a health care crisis in the future?
- What are those health care crises?
- What type of treatment might I receive for these health care crises?
- What are the benefits of each treatment? What are the burdens I may experience with those treatments?
- Are there any treatments that your doctor would not recommend for you? Why?

Step Three: Are there others I need to talk with?

As you begin to examine the tasks of coping with a serious illness and possible death, there may be others with whom to discuss your concerns. These people can include a close family member, friend, or pastor.

About 75% of American adults (over the age of 18) have not discussed these questions with their families or physicians or shared how they would like to be cared for during a serious illness. This lack of communication can create difficulties with families and caregivers. When loved ones do not know your wishes, precious time is taken away. It can even cause arguments between family members over what care you may or may not want. Taking the time to think, to discuss, and to document your thoughts and wishes can make your journey less stressful.

In preparation for meeting with these persons, write down your questions or concerns ahead of time. Explain that your reason or motivation for your life planning is to take control at a time of serious illness when control could be taken by others. Tell them how important your relationship to them is and that their input is valuable as you work to put your plan into place.

Step Four: Record your responses in the *Five Wishes* tool.

Five Wishes is a legal document that helps you express how you want to be cared for in case you become seriously ill and can't speak for yourself. It is written in everyday language and covers medical, legal, personal, spiritual, and family matters. Completing *Five Wishes* brings you peace of mind that comes from knowing your wishes will be known and respected. *Five Wishes* is also a gift for family members who will not have to guess what you want.

Be sure to complete the *Five Wishes* tool by signing it in front of two (2) witnesses. The job of the witness is to verify that YOU are the one signing your *Five Wishes*. You can also use a notary to verify your signature, although this is not required in Tennessee, Arkansas, or Mississippi.

Step Five: Giving your gift of life planning to others.

If you should become seriously ill, it is very important that others are aware and understand your wishes and desires for your health care. The way you give your life planning gift to others is to make copies of the *Five Wishes* and give them to your physicians, your family members and others who are special in your life. You can make as many copies of the signed *Five Wishes* tool as you would like.