

Using the Conversation Starter Kit Across the Spectrum of Memory Loss

When a person first receives a **diagnosis of a condition such as Alzheimer's disease that will result in cognitive decline**, he or she may wish to use (or be encouraged to use) the Starter Kit. This will help identify values and facilitate conversations with their decision makers and other family members who are likely to wish to participate in later decisions about medical care. Selecting an agent, also called a Medical Durable Power of Attorney (MDPOA) and documenting this choice is very important.

In the mid-stages of the disease, people with memory loss may still have moments when loved ones can recall with them a prior situation of death or dying ("Remember when Mom died?" "Remember when Dad was on a ventilator?"), and reminisce about how that felt. It is often possible to work through the Starter Kit, one section at a time.

In the later stages of the disease, when loved ones are no longer able to express their wishes, families may find it helpful to use the Starter Kit as a guide to reach consensus about the values expressed in the past by the person who has memory loss. If their loved one had earlier completed a Starter Kit and/or had talked about preferences, it is important to review this as a family. It may also be helpful to reflect on how he/she lived their life. Remembering family events and the values and opinions the loved one expressed in those situations can help anchor such discussions.

If you have not already done so, it is wise to seek more information about what to expect in later stages of dementia and what decisions you are likely to need to make. The Alzheimer's Association offers a helpful booklet entitled, *End of Life Wishes: Honoring the Wishes of a Person with Alzheimer's Disease*.

https://www.alz.org/national/documents/brochure_endoflifedecisions.pdf

It is wise to have these conversations, proactively, before treatment decisions need to be made. If decision maker(s) have been previously designated, that person might choose to use this process to gain support from the rest of the family. If a decision-maker hasn't been designated, families should discuss together who will make decisions in the future as they are needed. The support of a Conversation Project Coach may be helpful. This is a free service. Contact us at: info@theconversationprojectinboulder.org.