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Northern Health Palliative Care

Difficult Conversations in Advanced Disease

Goals of care discussions can be tough and often create anxiety for patients and caregivers. Please review the below tips for responding to common road blocks

Road Blocks	Strategies
A patient who does not want to talk about their illness or death and dying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss feelings/reasons for not wanting to engage • Talk about the pros/cons of discussing these issues • If they have specific concerns/intense anxiety about specific topics explore these concerns/fears • Ask about how the patient thinks about the future
Patients with unrealistic expectations (ie. "I will beat this no matter what")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let them know you are on their side and explain you may "wish" you could cure them, but know it's not possible. Then explore other things they might be able to "fight for" such as quality of life ... if "beating their illness" is not possible • Acknowledge their hope for to beat their illness and explain the need to prepare for the "worst"
Patient reluctant to stop medical treatments or therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore fears about stopping active treatment • Explain more treatment does not guarantee more time • If there are clinical indications to stop treatment, make a recommendation to stop treatment • Explain that stopping medical treatments does not mean they will not receive care

Other strategies for goals of care/difficult conversations:

Do:	Do NOT:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be honest and share information about illness and prognosis • Allow for silence • Explore emotions as they arise • Document your conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk for more than half the conversation • Give false reassurance or false hope • Ignore patient's emotional responses and continue talking about their disease or medical treatments • Focus only on treatments/procedures

Reference: *Serious Illness Care Program: Reference Guide for Clinicians* (pp. 1-13). (2016). N.p.: Ariadne Labs and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.