

Talking About Your Diagnosis

For patients with a serious illness

Deciding Who to Tell

Many patients find it hard to talk about their diagnosis. Take it a step at a time. You may not want to tell everyone you know. There may be some people you want to tell right away.

First, decide who you need or want to tell, and how much you want to tell them. Your family and close friends will be directly affected. It is helpful for these people to know what you're going through. Knowing your diagnosis will help them understand the stress you are under and the changes you are going through.

Talking with Children

Children often know more than adults give them credit for. They may suspect something is wrong even before you tell them.

When talking with young ones:

- Be honest.
- Be realistic.
- Give them information according to their age and ability to understand.



Talk with children in words that they can understand.

There are books for both parents and children you may find helpful when preparing to talk with young ones. Your social worker can suggest some titles.

Talking with Your Boss

How much you tell a boss about your health is your decision. Some people find it helpful to tell their employers about their diagnosis. Others wish to keep the specifics private. Do what feels right to you.

One reason to tell your boss is to make it easier when you need to change your work schedule or miss some work days. As long as you can do your work, there are laws to protect you from discrimination due to an illness. To learn more, please see the handout “Working During and After Treatment.”

No matter what type of relationship you have with your boss, it’s a good idea to keep records of your conversations about your diagnosis. If you ask for special accommodations for your work, ask for this in writing. You may also want to make a copy of any recent performance reviews and any positive statements about your work.

Talking About End of Life

It is normal for people diagnosed with a serious illness to start thinking about what they might want or need in the weeks, months, or years ahead. They often want to talk about the possibility of death.

But, some people might not want to talk about this topic. They may feel it’s too hard or sad to talk about.

Talking about what the future may hold can be an important and powerful part of the coping process. It can help you gain some sense of control over your life. Making plans can also give you and your loved ones a sense of peace.

Your social worker has practical tools and guides to help you plan for these conversations. Also see the handout “Advance Care Planning.”

Questions?

Your questions are important. Ask your doctor or healthcare provider to connect you with a social worker who can help answer your questions or concerns.

Your provider or social worker's name and number:
