

SERIOUS ILLNESS COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

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Communication Reference Guide

KEY SKILLS AND SAMPLE STATEMENTS				
Affirmation Acknowledging patient's strengths and abilities	Reflection		Exploring Encouraging patient exploration	"I wish" Aligning with the patient's experience
	Simple Restate or rephrase what patient says	Complex Interpretation such as naming feelings		
<i>You are such a (strong, committed, caring) person.</i>	<i>This is really important to you.</i>	<i>You can't imagine discussing this with your son, but at the same time you're worried about how this could affect him later.</i>	<i>What do you mean when you say I don't want to give up (be a vegetable/ a burden/ on life support)?</i>	<i>I, too, hope that _____ happens.</i>
<i>You (or your dad, mom, child, spouse) are such a strong person, and have been through so much.</i>	<i>You just aren't ready to discuss this yet.</i>	<i>One of the hardest things for you is all the uncertainty. On one hand, _____, and on the other, _____.</i>	<i>What else?</i>	<i>I wish things weren't so stressful for your family.</i>
<i>This is very difficult to think about, and yet you are still willing to talk to me about it.</i>	<i>So _____ has been the most difficult symptom for you to deal with.</i>	<i>This sounds frustrating (scary, overwhelming, difficult, challenging, hard).</i>	<i>Tell me more...</i>	<i>I wish the situation were different.</i>
<i>You have done so much to try to manage your illness (help your loved one with their illness).</i>	<i>Dealing with this illness has been such a big part of your life and has taken so much energy.</i>	<i>Other people in your situation have told me this feels very (name emotion).</i>	<i>Tell me more about what [a miracle, fighting, not giving up, etc.] might look like for you.</i>	<i>I hope for a miracle, too.</i>

SAMPLE RESPONSES TO CHALLENGING STATEMENTS/QUESTIONS

These statements are examples of empathic continuers. Patients may not immediately respond to your first empathic statement. It often takes multiple successive empathic responses to help patients work through strong emotion.

<p>God's going to bring me a miracle.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I too hope that a miracle happens. (Remember no buts!) ("I wish") • You have such a strong faith. (affirmation) • Having faith is very important to you. (reflection) • Can you share with me what a miracle might look like for you? (exploring) 	<p>My dad is a fighter!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is. He is such a strong person and he has been through so much. (affirmation) • You care about your dad so much. (affirmation) • It must be so (name emotion) to see him so sick. (reflection) • Tell me more about your dad and what matters most to him. (exploring) 	<p>Do you know something I don't know?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me more about what you are asking. (exploring) • You seem worried. (reflection) • You are wondering if there is something your doctors haven't told you. (reflection) • What is your understanding of where things are at with your health? (open ended) • This situation must be very (name emotion). (reflection)
<p>Why are we talking about this now?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You seem worried/overwhelmed/scared. (reflection) • Maybe you aren't ready to discuss this right now. (reflection) • That's ok if you don't want to discuss this right now. (affirmation) • You don't think this is a good time to discuss this. Tell me more about what the right time would look like. (exploring) 	<p>Are you giving up on me?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It sounds like you might be feeling.... (name emotion) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Alone ○ Scared ○ Etc. • We will go through this together. (affirmation) • No – I want to make sure we get you the best care possible to take care of what's going on for you now. 	<p>Are you telling me my dad is dying?</p> <p>These responses will affirm the question empathically – so do not use them if the patient is not dying</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wish the situation were different. ("I wish") • This must be such a shock for you. (reflection) • I can't even imagine how difficult this must be. (reflection)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Resource	Description	Website
Bekelman et al., 2017	Provides a Structured Goals of Care Communication Guide for nurses and social workers.	https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5576094/
Ariadne labs, joint innovation of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.	Provides comprehensive resources including a Serious Illness Conversation Guide, a Serious Illness Clinician Reference Guide, Serious Illness training program resources and patient and family resources.	https://www.ariadnelabs.org/areas-of-work/serious-illness-care/
US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017 Life Sustaining Treatment Decision Initiative (LSTDI).	Includes comprehensive serious illness training materials and resources for patients, nurses, social workers, chaplains, physicians, advance practice professionals and physician assistants.	https://www.ethics.va.gov/go/alsofcaretraining/Practitioner.asp

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