

# For a Moment the World Quiets

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There's been an accident....

It does not matter what follows those words, car, work, home, farm, criminal activity, medical emergency; whatever the cause of the accident, the mere fact that it has occurred can change everything. In an instant you go from the steady hum of your life full of appointments and activities; to hand wringing, breath holding frozen inaction as you try to make sense of what you are hearing.

No one knows when or if they will receive a phone call like this; however, if you do, and the result is your loved one is in the hospital on life sustaining equipment; it is devastating. Suddenly, your calendar and plans change. You have decisions to make about treatments or not to treat. You may need to travel and you may need to make care arrangements for other family members and on and on. All of this anxiety does not even deal with the likely financial impact as you may miss work and need to contend with the cost related to the accident and the treatments.

The most challenging part of this scenario could be trying to determine what your loved one would want you to do in this situation. Specifically, depending on their own frame of reference, some would choose to have every treatment possible to maintain life regardless of the outcome, while others may choose to decline treatment knowing the eventual outcome. For example, the loved one is in the ICU, you are told they have sustained life threatening injuries and treatment of those injuries requires surgery or they will lose an extremity; however, they have a heart condition that needs surgery, but two surgeries are not possible. Save the heart or the leg? Some people would not even struggle with the decision to let the leg go as they still see a quality of life as an amputee. Others would choose to save the leg as they may feel, if I can't walk I would rather not be here. Either decision has merit. It really depends on the individual's preferences and point of view.

Continuing this scenario, regardless of which surgery occurs, the loved one could have a complication during the surgery that results in them being on life sustaining equipment and challenges associated with determining if there is brain activity. At many points in these

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types of situations, you find yourself making life and death decisions for someone else. Something most of us do not have to do as a part of our normal albeit very busy high stress lives.

If the accident had resulted in the death of your loved one it is tragic; however, you go straight into final arrangement planning. Eventually you end up in the stages of grief as you work towards acceptance of the loss. You are not challenged with the anxiety of all the life and death decision making. If your loved one died, you must accept the outcome. If they are in the hospital on life sustaining equipment, you may still go through the stages of grief because you have certainly experienced a loss; but you are challenged to make decisions as well through the grieving process which can be extremely complicated and prolonged.

Nothing will make this easy; however, talking about these types of situations before they happen does allow you to express your wishes and desires so that your loved ones are not wondering what you would want.

For example, suppose your loved one who is at an advanced age with chronic health problems, has lived a good life and expressed they are ready when God calls them and then they have a nearly life ending accident. Consider these possible outcomes.

Outcome 1: They have an advanced directive and you are their health care power of attorney. You provide the hospital with the paperwork and as the durable healthcare power of attorney, you request a do not resuscitate (DNR) order from the doctor. If your loved one does go into full cardiac arrest, the hospital can allow them to die.

Outcome 2: If someone does not provide an advanced directive and assume the responsibility of the durable healthcare power of attorney and request the DNR, doctors will attempt to save the life at all cost. This outcome could mean that the doctors can make the heart beat again and fill the lungs with oxygen with assistance from machines, and keep the body “alive”, while your loved one’s brain has stopped. Once your loved one is unconscious they cannot ask for this situation to be changed.

Which do you want for your own life? What do your loved ones want for their lives? For many the decision is easy based on their own frame of reference or spiritual beliefs, others have not really contemplated it and may not have an opinion. The only way to know is to talk about it while you are healthy. Make a point to fit these difficult conversations into your calendar, so that no one is left wringing their hands wondering what you would have wanted. Don’t wait until the world is quiet!

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