

How to Have the Talk About Hospice Care

We all tend to steer clear of conversations about those things that scare us the most – like saying goodbye to those we love.

Especially in our death-denying culture, often families wait to talk about plans for end-of-life care, or specialty care services like hospice.

Melissa Maranell, LSW, Avera@Home Hospice coordinator, says she knows it's hard. But it's so important, you must discuss it. It's a difficult conversation to have – but it's one that can really save someone you love from suffering. Hospice can help them, as we say, not so much add days to their life, but to add life to their days."

Maranell said the facts bear this out. Hospice care is covered by Medicare for up to six months in many cases. Yet Centers for Medicare & Medicaid statistics show that families and their loved ones who could benefit from the tailored specialty services that make up hospice are only typically using those services for an average of 71 days. That's just the average; at least half of all hospice patients have stays of less than 15 days.

"This happens too much," she said. "People wait too long and the benefits they could receive go unused, even in cases when insurance or Medicare will cover the cost. Hospice isn't about dying – it's about making life as comfortable as possible for the patient, and for their family."

Starting the conversation can be easier for families if they turn to Avera@Home specialists like Maranell first.

"While a doctor's order is needed to begin hospice care, families can reach out to us at any time, and we can provide them facts. We can give them information that can help with these decisions," she said. "Too many people – even some who work in health care – are less-than-familiar with hospice and its focus. We do whatever we can to ensure quality of life and comfort and give families and patients the opportunity to focus on the important things."

Such conversations start with a lot of listening, Maranell said.

"In many cases we have this 'She's not there yet' mentality from the family, because they associate hospice with the end," she said. "Sometimes we then have a call from the same family who says they needed hospice yesterday as they face a crisis. We can help avoid that stressful situation."

One metaphor she uses is travel. You can certainly get your tickets and pack your bags and fly to Europe, finding your way as you go. Or you can get a tour guide and not get lost – or run into trouble.

"Avera@Home can be your guide and help you find your way with hospice services, so that it's the right fit for you, your family and your loved one who needs it," she said.