It's time to talk

The most important conversations often are the most difficult to have.

Where to start

Mike’s tips are helpful to talk to the dying, loved ones — and yourself.

Know your stuff: Research your disease and bring a list of questions to your doctor (see column at right). If you need support, bring along a friend or family member. Ask to tape record the medical interview so you can understand all the details of the conversation.

Build teams: When you talk to your doctor, nurses, social workers, clergy, and other care providers, think of each person as a league, all interested in the same thing — helping you get well. Ask the doctor, “What can I do to help the doctor, ‘What can I do to help you get well?”

Learn from others: Call up a local hospice or hospital to find nearby support groups or educational programs for people facing the same medical care or support challenges.

Share experiences: Get your group — say, church or senior center — to discuss the experiences of people who have lived with cancer and who have shared their stories of triumph and challenges.

Plan proactively: When you talk to the treatment plan for your remaining time with your loved ones. Discuss your medical options (living will and health-care proxy) and defined limits. Ask your doctor if you can have a copy of your comprehensive care plan.

Don’t waste time: Share with your loved ones what you like to do with the remaining time you have left, getting together with friends, or for a picnic. It is also important to lay out plans you can take action on.

Tie up loose ends. Think about what the unresolved issues are for you and your family, and what you can do to achieve some closure. For example, tell someone you love that you are about to start a new job.

Tell your story: Make a video or audiobook of your life. You and your children,reading, telling stories of your life and candidly sharing your feelings with them.

Write a down. Think of writing as a conversation with yourself. Write about your life in various stages. You and your family should have a conversation about what your life was about.

Look for the window of opportunity: If you and your family are trying to balance life-prolonging treatments with your quality of life, it might be time for you to consider dying as the next stage of your life. The more you talk with others, the more you will find the answers to your questions and handle the process in the time that remains.

FINDING OUR WAY: Living with Dying in America

By DILILA TARLOW

The conversation Janet Fossett never expected or wanted to have: The disease that had kept her in her bed had reached an advanced stage, and she was spreading.

She was 46, a wife and a mother. But with that doctor’s office visit, she took her first step toward confronting her disease. Two months later, in Delmar, N.Y., because one member of an aging nation forced to wrestle in words with his own mortality. 

But most Americans say they want quality at the end of life, that they dread the discussion that make dying well possible.

“I was scared of what test results would show,” says Dr. Laura Esserman, director of the University of California at San Francisco’s Carolin Frankl Fund Chair. “I view patients “to remember the treatments and services are for you, not the physician.”

Talking to her doctor, Janet said, was tough. But the conversation that followed was exhilarating.

“Among my values that are most important in deciding what treatment is right for you,” says Dr. Kenneth D. Olchow, assistant professor, department of counseling psychology, University of Georgia.

“Janet found a path through her fear,” she said. “I had to teach myself to do what I knew I had to do to keep my illness, find good doctors, and answer when I was asked.”

Dr. Janet Fossett of Delmar, N.Y., learned to have conversations about cancer after Janet was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer in April 2000.

“Janet, the answer began with a book. Janet and her husband met with a social worker from the American Cancer Society for a group called "Cure to the Cure," and a book read aloud on her way back to New York. “We talked about her fears: "You should have two­breast disease, "said Janet. "We were both scared of the future and scared of each other. We were scared of the world. Our lives are like this..."

”Yes. But the doctors in Boston have good medicine. "Really? said Janet. "I don’t know what you’re talking about.

"How will we know when death is near? "What signs should my family look for, and what can they do for me?"

Jim, Jeffrey and Janet Fossett of Delmar, N.Y., learned to have conversations about cancer after Janet was diagnosed with stage III breast cancer in April 2000.