Post-Documentary Discussion Prompts

The goal of the post-documentary discussion is for participants to arrive at an action plan for their own advance care planning. But, before they can do that, they will benefit from a conversation that helps them to connect the dots between the story, the issues, and their own feelings and experience.

Help audience members connect to the story by asking them to walk in the shoes of certain characters. What would they do? The discussion prompts below can help.

Ask audience members what barriers they have experienced:
  o In bringing the conversation up with their doctor/their patient/their family.
  o In taking other steps in their planning, such as developing advance directives or identifying a primary decisionmaker.

Here are some questions designed to help identify ideas for personal action and open up the discussion:

• Dr. Gawande explains that in his training as a surgeon, he has struggled with the fear of not being able to “fix” a problem for a patient, even when he knows the odds are not good. If you were Dr. Gawande’s patient, what would you like him to know about your hopes for how he would communicate with you if he had determined that he could no longer “cure” you? If you are a clinician, how do you balance your training to “cure” a patient while still providing hope, even when a cure is no longer possible?

• Dr. Nayak’s patient, Bill, tells her that he is not afraid of dying, but he is afraid of the pain he might endure. What are your own worries or fears about what the end-of-life situation might be like? If you are a clinician, what tools do you need to help address patient concerns about pain at the end of life?

• Norma Bananeau gets very upset by the news that her cancer has taken a more aggressive turn because she has plans to take her family to Disneyland for Christmas. Are there activities or plans you have that you are counting on completing in your lifetime?

• The brain cancer doctor, Dr. Nayak, often works with patients who are not likely to survive their conditions. But even she feels the pressure to give them some hope. If you were her patient, what kind of conversation could you imagine having with her to balance hope with reality so that you can make the best use of the time you have left? As a clinician, what role does “hope” play in your discussions with patients who are facing end-of-life decisions?

• In one scene, Jeff Shields and his grandson talk about the fact that he is dying and his grandson has an opportunity to ask some difficult questions. How would you feel about having a similar conversation with your loved ones at the end of life? Would that conversation with an adult be different than the one you’d have with a young person?
• Was there a particular part of the documentary that really hit home for you in thinking about what you want for yourself and your family around end-of-life decisions?

• What ideas did the documentary give you about what you might want your doctor and those close to you to know about your end-of-life preferences? Thinking about the answer to this question is the first step in taking action to document your wishes.

• Is there someone in your life who knows what matters most to you in making the kinds of decisions we saw the patients and families in the documentary having to make?
  a. If so, who is it? Have you spoken to him or her about it?
  b. If no, is there someone you would like to reach out to about this?

• What are two (or more) actions that you would be willing to take now in order to help yourself and those close to you communicate your wishes about end-of-life care?

• If you are a medical professional, what is difficult for you about starting the conversation about end-of-life treatment options with patients with a possibly terminal diagnosis and what would you like your patients to know?

• As a patient or potential patient, what do you expect from healthcare professionals – physicians, nurses and social workers? What would you like them to know about these conversations?

For small groups without facilitators, consider handing out sheets of paper featuring two or three of these questions for the group to go over together.

If time allows, you may want to reconvene the full group after the small group discussions. This will allow people to ask any questions that may have come up in their group and can provide a sense of closure for your event. One way to re-engage the audience as a full group once they’ve reconvened is to start by asking, “What was difficult and what was easy about the conversations you just had?”