

Living On:

A Guide to Legacy and Memory Making

Adult Palliative Care Program



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For copies of this booklet, please contact the Palliative Care Program's Administrative Office at (734) 936-8357.

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Introduction

When individuals and their families are faced with a serious and life-limiting disease, many find clarity in what is most important. Some people find meaning in experiences that help them to reflect, remember and connect.

This booklet will provide ideas for you and your loved ones to engage in meaning making, legacy activities and memory sharing.

These suggestions are not all-encompassing in regards to honoring a life. Use this booklet in whatever way feels right to you.

Ethical wills and legacy letters

An ethical will (also called a legacy letter) is something you create to share and document your:

- Values
- Blessings
- Hopes for the future
- Lessons learned

Ethical wills and legacy letters are not legal documents; they are instead an expression of the things that matter most in your life. They may be completed during a challenging season of life, at the time of a birth or death, or at the time of a milestone.

Here are some prompts to get you started:

I am creating my ethical will because:

I want to share my ethical will with:

I believe:

My values are:

A lesson I learned:

I'm sorry:

I offer forgiveness:

I am grateful for:

I love:

My hopes for the future:

Telling a life's story

Stories help connect us. They share the joy of triumphs and the grief of the most challenging moments. They tell of lessons learned and may even help to guide us in the future. When stories are shared, they become woven into the larger picture of our family and community.

- Write in a journal, use your phone, a video or audio recorder to capture important stories.

Here are some questions from Story Corps:

- Who has been the most important person in your life? Can you tell me about them?
- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did that person teach you?
- Who has been the kindest to you in your life?
- What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?
- What is your earliest memory?
- What is your favorite memory of me?
- Are there any funny stories your family tells about you that come to mind?
- Are there any funny stories or memories or characters from your life that you want to tell me about?
- What are you proudest of?
- When in life have you felt most alone?
- If you could hold on to one memory from your life forever, what would that be?
- How has your life been different than what you'd imagined?
- How would you like to be remembered?

- Do you have any regrets?
- What does your future hold?
- What are your hopes for what the future holds for me? For my children?
- If this was to be our very last conversation, is there anything you'd want to say to me?
- For your great-great grandchildren listening to this many years from now: is there any wisdom you'd want to pass on to them? What would you want them to know?
- Is there anything that you've never told me but want to tell me now?
- Is there something about me that you've always wanted to know but have never asked?
- Can you tell me about your illness?
- Do you think about dying? Are you scared?
- How do you imagine your death?
- Do you believe in an after-life?
- Do you look at your life differently now than before you were diagnosed?
- Do you have any last wishes?
- If you were to give advice to me or my children, or even children to come in our family, what would it be?
- What have you learned from life? The most important things?
- Has this illness changed you? What have you learned?
- How do you want to be remembered?

For more questions: <https://storycorps.org>

Mementos and photos

Photographs are often an important keepsake. This could include family photos, photos from vacation, holidays, or joyous moments and celebrations.

Here are some ways you can use photos and mementos to reflect:

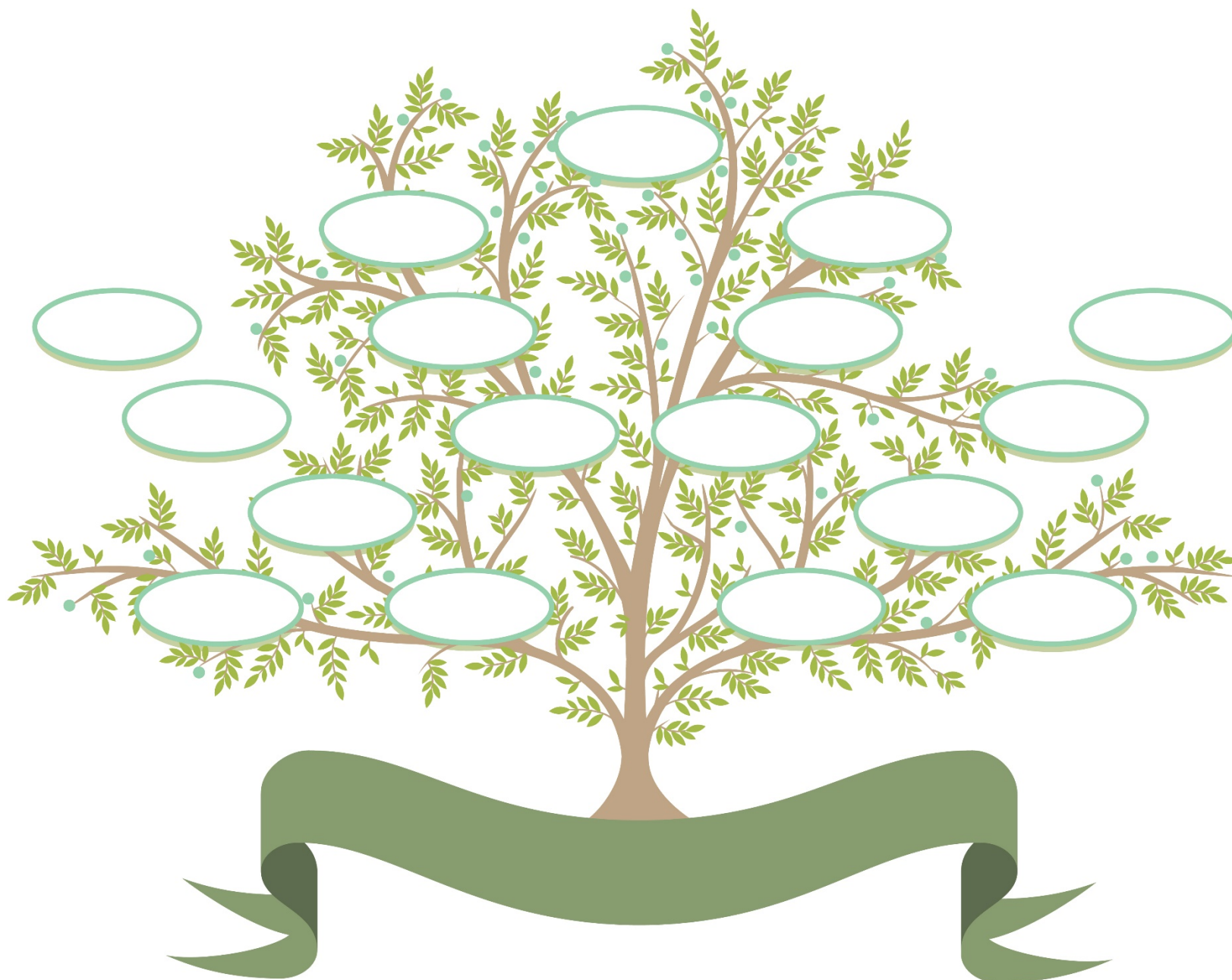
- Review photographs to prompt memories or story sharing.
- Review mementos of shared experiences such as concert or film tickets, or airplane, train or bus tickets, etc.
- Gather these items into a book or box, as a way to keep special memories together for later viewing.
- Create a collage of magazine cut-outs of words or pictures that remind you of your person.

Family Tree

A family tree is a way of mapping relationships between people. It may include family members or friends who feel like family. See page 10 for a family tree template.

There are several websites that can help you create a family tree:

- Ancestry: <https://www.ancestry.com>
- Family Echo: <https://www.familyecho.com/>



Comfort food

Cooking together and sharing meals is an important part of family and cultural practices. Cooking and gathering is often a way that we have nurtured and cared for one another as well.

The smells, tastes and types of food we eat often remind us of specific gatherings or people in our lives.

Honor these memories by recording favorite recipes. You may choose to:

- Write down family recipes, or ones made on special occasions
- Create a recipe book
- Share a special meal together
- Write down a memory you think of when you make a special recipe or share a special food

Recipe name: _____

From _____ **'s kitchen**

A memory about this recipe:

Ingredients:

Instructions:

Traditions

What traditions have been most important to you and to those you care about?

Here are some ways to honor these traditions:

- Some people choose to practice a tradition, even if it's not the right season or time of year, so they can experience a special moment with their loved ones.
- It's also normal to think about what traditions may change, and to grieve those changes. Are there ways you can continue certain traditions, as a way to honor a loved one? Could you create a new tradition?

Tunes

Music can bring us back to an important time or place and help us remember special memories.

- What music connects you to special memories?
- You may choose to play or listen to music together or create a playlist of favorite music (using Amazon Prime Music, Google Music, iTunes, YouTube).

Honoring future moments

When facing uncertainty, it is normal to think about future special events, and grieve the loss of those moments.

Some people choose to honor those moments by writing letters to be opened at a specific time in the future, hosting an event early so that a special person can be a part of it, or creating something that can be opened or enjoyed during future significant events (ie., holidays, weddings, graduations).

Additional Resources:

Michigan Medicine Department of Social Work

<http://www.med.umich.edu/socialwork/>

- Michigan Medicine Office of Decedent Affairs

<https://www.med.umich.edu/socialwork/oda/>

- The Friends and Family Letter Project

<http://med.stanford.edu/letter/friendsandfamily.html>

- Story Corps

<https://storycorps.org/>

Bibliography

- <https://www.mdanderson.org/publications/cancerwise/making-memories-last-the-art-of-legacy-work.h00-158673423.html>
- <http://celebrationsoflife.net/ethicalwill-com/>
- <https://storycorps.org/>
- <https://www.familytreetemplates.net/>
- <http://med.stanford.edu/letter/friendsandfamily.html>
- <http://transitionspc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Legacy-Building-Activities-handout-version.pdf>

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[EllenaZ], [Memories. stock photo] via Getty Images
[Tomacco], [Family tree stock illustration] via Getty Images

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