

Atul Gawande's 5 Questions to Ask at Life's End

The surgeon and writer wants to guide a new kind of care in America

By Sue Campbell
February 10, 2015

Everyone deserves to be asked five questions as they face life's end, Dr. Atul Gawande says. And if families and doctors learn to ask and then really listen to the answers, he believes, care in this country will radically change.

I spoke to Gawande the day his documentary film about end of life was to premiere on PBS's Frontline. The movie is based on his bestselling book, *Being Mortal*. Both the show and the book add to **a growing national conversation about aging well** and living fully when you have limited time. More and more, the focus is on what those facing their own mortality want — not just which treatments will extend life.

"We tend to assume that safety and health are paramount, without asking: 'Are you lonely? What would you like?' And if the Alzheimer's patient wants to eat 40 cookies, that's not necessarily good for him — but I want to say, 'So what?' That's living," Gawande said.

Gawande has a unique vantage point as both surgeon and son. His father's life — and death — were the inspiration for his examination into end-of-life issues. He also drew from experience treating patients and from about 200 interviews he conducted to **create a systematic approach that gives patients a feeling of relief and sense of control**.

Now, through his research lab, **Gawande is training doctors to ask the five questions** and testing and measuring what changes for patients when they do. The goal is to scale the approach so it becomes part of routine end-of-life care for patients.

The five questions are:

1. What is your understanding now of where you are with your illness?
2. What are your biggest fears and worries about your future health?
3. What abilities are so critical to your life that you can't imagine living without them?
4. What outcomes are unacceptable to you? What are you willing to sacrifice and not?

And later,

5. What would a good day look like?

Gawande went on to explain:

"Asking these allows everybody to understand what the goal really is — what are you really fighting for? It's for a life that contains certain things.

This is not just a conversation doctors have; any family can have it, too. **It's not just about the last weeks of life, it's about the last decade.** We are all going to spend a significant part of life with our health getting worse, we'll get frail and have more illness — and that is a victory. We get an extra 20 years after age 65, the bonus years. What's acceptable to us and what's not? That's the conversation that has to become normal in our country and in the world."

"That doesn't mean you give up on getting the treatments you want; it means you look at the priorities that are most important to you."

-Dr. Atul Gawande