



*Creating a lasting legacy when you have a serious illness: The Gift of an **Ethical Will***

It is helpful to reflect back on our lives and experiences, our successes, challenges, influences, and wisdom gained. We may choose to do this at any turning point in our lives, such as middle age or when facing major changes.

This reflection about our lives and loved ones is especially common when faced with a serious illness. We often think about the memories we've shared, lessons we've learned, and dreams that we hope for. As your illness progresses, the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual changes can be frightening and people often report feeling emotional and spiritual distress.

How Can I Care For Myself As My Illness Advances?

You need to make sure that you are caring for yourself so you have the strength and energy to devote to living and enjoying your time in whatever way you are able. From these suggestions, choose the ones that are most helpful for your situation.

- Watch for signs of emotional distress: extreme sadness, crying all the time, constantly worrying, losing interest in what you used to find pleasurable, and not feeling like yourself. If any of these symptoms make it difficult for you to accomplish your daily tasks, speak to a doctor or social worker
- Listen to friends or family if they notice changes in your mood
- Maintain contact with friends and family. Social isolation can increase emotional distress
- Pick and choose activities that are most important to you if you get tired easily
- **Don't be afraid to say no** to certain activities if you are trying to conserve your energy for projects you want to accomplish
- Try to give yourself a few minutes each day for quiet reflection, prayer, or meditation if that is a comfort to you
- Eat small bits of food throughout the day. Do not worry if it is not a full meal. Eat foods that appeal to you
- Drink water regularly
- Discuss your feelings and spiritual thoughts with a rabbi or chaplain
- Do not be alarmed if you find yourself angry with G-d or wondering about your beliefs
- Reviewing your spiritual concerns and values is a **normal activity** when you have a serious illness, after a crisis, or at the end of life.



Sharing Memories, Values, and Hopes

What Will Help Me Regain a Sense of Control?

When someone's illness is progressing, it is common to feel out-of-control, hopeless, and afraid. Taking care of finances and legal documents can help with this anxiety. Here are some practical ways to regain a sense of control:

- Organize your important financial and legal papers
- Explain to your family where these documents are kept
- Name a person that you want to oversee your daily business once you are no longer able
- Finalize [advance directive](#) documents [see [Advance Care Planning](#) Chapter]
- Write a will explaining where you want your material possessions to go
- Create an ethical will (see below)
- Pre-plan a funeral or memorial service



What is an Ethical Will?

An ethical will is an opportunity to say and leave a permanent record of your values, memories, beliefs, ideas and personal reflections to friends, family, and important people in your life. It is a way to securely pass on those memories, special events, philosophies, and sentimental thoughts that would be lost or forgotten without a physical reminder. This written document, video, or audio tape is something that loved ones can hold on to once you are no longer able to communicate. Unlike a traditional will, an ethical will is **not** a legal document and does not discuss tangible things you own. It can be written at any point in one's life and re-written as our values change.

History of an Ethical Will

The idea of ethical wills was first written in the Hebrew Bible thousands of years ago [Genesis, Ch. 49]. During biblical times, ethical wills were expressed orally. As communication styles have changed, this type of will began to be written and currently people to choose to write, tape-record, or video-record their legacies to their family.

Sharing Memories, Values, and Hopes

What Should My Ethical Will Include?

The most important part of an ethical will is that it is **spoken from the heart**. This is what will give the most benefit to you in reviewing your life and to your loved ones when they experience your words and remember **you**, what was important to you, and how you found meaning in life. A few well thought-out sentences can be as meaningful as many pages of writing. If you are unable to write or find it too difficult, ethical wills can also be done with a tape recorder or video camera where your wishes and thoughts are spoken. It can vary in length and wording, and the amount of time it takes to create it may also vary from hours to years. The ethical will is a gift you may choose to give to your friends and loved ones. You can ask a close friend or a health care professional to help you, if needed.

Helpful Hints for an Ethical Will

- Speak to your loved ones directly
- Attempt to mention something special about individuals who have deeply touched your life
- If written, use acid-free paper and high quality ink to prolong the life of your will
- Practice ahead of time what you will say before you write or say the final version
- Carefully choose your words so that you do not harm your loved ones. Remember when they read it you will not be able to explain yourself
- Feel free to update your will as events and life experiences change

Possible Topics

- What I Loved About Life
- How I See Your Future
- What I Will Miss About You
- Things I Am Most Proud Of
- Things I Would Like You To Continue
- Things I Would Like To Be Forgiven For
- Dreams That I Realized
- Values That Are Important To Me
- Mistakes That I Have Made And Learned From
- My Happiest Moments
- My Funniest Stories
- Let Me Tell You About...
- Ways That I Have Survived Difficult Times
- Who and What Have Influenced My Life
- Wishes For The Future

*These are just suggestions.
You do not have to write
them all or any of them.
It is most important that
your Ethical Will reflect
what is cherished by you.
It will be as unique as your
fingerprint.*

Sharing Memories, Values, and Hopes

Example of an Ethical Will

My Dearest Family:

Today I realized that time is passing and I want to make sure you know how I feel about you. I am writing it down in case I am never able to tell you in person.

Natalia, my sweet daughter, you are the light of my life. You have brought joy that I never knew I would be able to feel since you came into my life. I know that your special spirit will change the world in both big and small ways. Believe in yourself and never let anyone make you question yourself. Your spirit is strong and your future is bright. Anyone is lucky if they are able to have you in their lives.

Leonid, my soul-mate. What can I say? Words seem so trite. We grew up together and you have taught me so much about life, the world, and myself. When I read stories as a child about marriage I never knew how much work and faith it would take. I have learned to be strong and flexible. I feel so lucky to have had my own unique fairy-tale. I hope I have given your heart a safe place. Know that I will carry it with me wherever I go.

Please take care of each other. Know that I will be with you even when I am not here physically. My soul will soar and you will be in my heart forever.

You each are wonderful contributions to this world. No one and nothing can change that. Celebrate life and when you laugh, think of me.

Your mother and wife,

Inna



Sharing Memories, Values, and Hopes

Funded By

This project has been funded by a grant from the Jewish Healing and Hospice Alliance, an initiative of the United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York in collaboration with CancerCare.



About CancerCare

CancerCare is a national non-profit organization that provides free professional counseling, educational programs, financial assistance and practical help to people with cancer, their loved ones and the bereaved.

For more information about any of CancerCare's services

Visit our website at www.cancercare.org

Or call 1-800-813-HOPE (4673)

