

# Making end-of-life decisions now will ease loved ones' pain later

BY KRISTEN JORDAN SHAMUS  
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Each of us comes with an expiration date. We just don't know when it is.

Death can steal you away in your prime, as it did my mother's sister, Louise. She was driving on a country road on a summer day when a tire blew out on her station wagon. In an instant, she was gone. She left behind a husband and three small children -- along with the lingering feeling that life isn't fair or predictable.

Death can wait until you don't think you can't bear another day of life, as it did with my father's sister. Susan had suffered for months with pancreatic cancer, enduring chemotherapy and incredible pain. Just a few days before Christmas, her son told her that she didn't have to keep on fighting through the holidays. He told her that if she wanted to let go, it was OK. They would be all right. And so she did. And it was merciful.

Death answers to no one. My grandmother, who will be 92 next month, says she's lived as long as she needs to. She keeps asking us all to pray that God will take her soon. I can't bring myself to do that.

My grandmother was hospitalized with pneumonia this winter, and that's when doctors realized just how poorly her heart is working. They asked her children whether, if the worst happened, she should be resuscitated. She made her wishes clear: "Get a big stick and hit me over the head."

Even knowing what she wanted, it was hard for her children to answer the doctors. Her daughters finally agreed to do as their mother asked. Not that they went into the woods looking for a hefty branch, but they did sign a do-not-resuscitate order.

And yet, death continues to elude the woman who says she wants so very much for it to come. Her struggles have me thinking quite a bit lately about end-of-life issues -- not the sort of thing anybody enjoys talking about over dinner, or anytime for that matter, despite the inevitability of it.

It's something we all have to face. People we love will die, even when they have so much to live for. And sooner or later, death will take us, too.

The truth is, you never know which approach death will take. It could be today or tomorrow, sudden or slow. It could be in another 50 years. But whenever it is, do the people you love the favor of making it as easy as you can for them.

Have you prepared? Have you left your family in a good position so they'll know your wishes -- not just about who gets your fabulous crystal vase, but for what really matters, like your kids, your pets?

If you don't have a living will, consider addressing that now. If you feel strongly about being resuscitated or kept alive on a ventilator, put it in writing. Learn about power of attorney.

For help, contact the nonprofit Care Connections at [www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org) or 800-658-8898 or check out the AARP's Web site, [www.aarp.org/families/end\\_life](http://www.aarp.org/families/end_life).

Contact *KRISTEN JORDAN SHAMUS*: 313-222-5997 or [kshamus@freepress.com](mailto:kshamus@freepress.com)