

CASE STUDY

Integrating End-of-life Conversation Starter Tools into Financial Services Practice: Personal Experience Sparks Passion to Help Others

Beth Gamel, Managing Director at Argent Wealth Management, is no stranger to experiences with death. So when she heard Ellen Goodman talk about The Conversation Project's message about the importance of end-of-life care conversations, it personally hit home. Beth's sister spent her final days in hospice care at age 55 after living with ovarian cancer. Her brother died only a few years later. Beth became acutely aware that she was the only one left to help make any decisions on her parents' behalf, should they need someone to speak for them. Beth talks about how fortunate she was that both her parents made their wishes known to Beth early on and often. Her mom was able to articulate her own wishes for care to the nursing home staff when it came to the end of her life. She died having those wishes honored. When it was her dad's turn, Beth notes, "Dad talked openly about what quality of life he wanted, which was so empowering. I didn't have to make decisions, but rather ensure his wishes were respected." His path to hospice was the clear path. "It made it beautiful," Beth says about her dad's last days. These personal experiences and then learning about [The Conversation Project's Starter Kit](#) made it so clear to her that having these conversations was important for everyone. This sparked her passion to help spread this work and tools to others in the financial services field.

First step: Walk the talk.

Before bringing the Starter Kit to her clients and colleagues, Beth started with her own wishes. Beth and her husband each filled out their own Conversation Starter Kit, and then shared their wishes together with their adult daughter, a nurse practitioner who works with elderly patients. Beth's answers on the Starter Kit scale questions were consistently either ones or fives, with notes about specifics next to each answer. Her husband's answers were almost all threes – right down the middle – without further notes. This opened up an opportunity for discussion. Beth's daughter said to her dad, "That doesn't help me! If I need to make a decision, I don't want my siblings doubting my decisions. So please tell me more." She had seen many families go through doubts, angst, and arguments in her work setting and knew, like her mother, how important conversations were.

Next step: Integrate The Conversation Project into daily work with clients, building better relationships from the start.

Next, Beth brought The Conversation Project into two of her work areas: she integrated it into her wealth management firm work with clients, and into a cross-state study and professional development networking group of which she is a member.

Although most financial advisors don't necessarily talk about end-of-life care wishes with their clients, Beth sees making values-based decisions about the type of end-of-life care you may or may not want as a natural fit when talking with clients about estate planning; choosing a power of attorney and a health care proxy go hand-in-

Bringing up the importance of these conversations with clients may take you out of your comfort zone, but sharing the Conversation Starter Kit will deepen your relationship with clients and their families.

hand. With clients, she used to think she should wait to build a relationship first before bringing up any talk about end-of-life care decisions. However, she tested a different strategy with brand-new clients with great results. When reviewing their documents, she simply asks if they become sick, do they have strong feelings about what type of care they may want or not want? She shares TCP's website and Conversation Starter Kit as a tool to consider, in addition to any other paperwork they need to update or review. She also shares her own story with clients about how she, her husband, and her daughter have walked through their Starter Kits and have had the conversation together. Clients have noted the power in her story and expressed gratitude for having the Starter Kit as a tool to help have these conversations at home with loved ones.

Lessons learned and advice to advisors and financial firms

Many financial advisors may not wish to go out of their comfort zone to bring up end-of-life care with their clients, especially if they haven't had personal experience or impact from death in their own family. Reviewing TCP resources and videos, and going through the Conversation Starter Kit itself can help provide tips about how to make the uncomfortable comfortable and spark ideas about how to start. She also emphasizes that advisors are not having these intimate conversations directly with families; rather, they are providing a tool for their clients to have these conversations at home. She notes that prompting these conversations with clients right from the start is a powerful way to help build relationships with them from day one.

Additionally, because many firms put pressure on advisors to keep a large customer base, their time with clients is often mostly reactive rather than proactive. The sheer volume of clients some advisors have may limit the time they can spend with each individual client; time to deepen relationships may not seem available, at first. Beth suggests advisors triage their client base – prioritizing a select few that, if lost as a client, would make the biggest impact. Use the Conversation Starter Kit as a tool to engage this subset of clients more deeply. This small test can help advisors see the potential benefit of sharing this tool.

To ensure that these tools get directly into the hands of clients without solely relying on the advisor as messenger, Beth suggests that financial firms consider the following:

- ✓ Place the tools in client packets, within newsletters, and as a website link.
- ✓ Integrate the tools with other materials already being sent.
- ✓ Place a tick mark on advisor and/or client checklists to initiate conversations with family members about end-of-life/who will speak for them. This automatic prompt can help jumpstart these conversations at home.

Beth continues to receive appreciation from clients for these materials and advice.

Want to connect with Beth Gamel? Email bcgamel@argentwm.com

Key Steps for Financial Advisors:

1. Talk about your wishes first with your loved ones.
 2. Integrate conversation tools and prompts into existing steps you take with clients, when possible.
 3. Overcome your fear by trying it out with one or two clients to see how it goes.
 4. Start with simple questions: "If you become sick, do you have strong feelings about what type of care you may want or not want?" "Do you have someone to speak on your behalf if you aren't able to?"
 5. Get the tools into the hands of your clients so they can have conversations at home.
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