

# Final Wishes: End-of-Life Decisions<sup>1</sup>

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*“If only I knew what Mother would want, it would be easier to decide,” Sarah told her family after a conference with her mother’s doctors. The doctors had explained that her mother’s cancer had caused so much damage that she would need the help of several machines to keep her alive. They told Sarah there was almost no chance that her mother would wake up from the coma she was in. They suggested perhaps it was time to unhook the machines and let her mother die.*

*The doctors asked Sarah what she wanted them to do. They asked what her mother’s wishes would be.*

*Sarah has just joined the growing number of people who are faced with the most difficult decision of their lives. Should she agree to let the machines keep her mother alive? Or should she “allow” her mother to die?*

*“How can anyone make that decision?” she asked.*

*Sarah’s mother never had to make such a decision for her own mother forty years ago. But Sarah lives in a different time, and, medically speaking, in a different world. Now, Sarah has been asked to decide.*

## Final Wishes

What would you do if you were Sarah? If you were in this situation, what would your final wishes be? Who knows about your final wishes?

Families face these decisions every day, and not only with elderly family members. Car crashes, drug overdoses, and accidents can cause brain damage, coma, or a persistent vegetative state in people of any age.

How can you be sure that you would know what to do? How can you protect your own family from the decision Sarah had to make?

Fortunately, there are easy-to-use legal documents available to help you express your final wishes.

## **Five Wishes<sup>®</sup>**

The *Five Wishes<sup>®</sup>* materials were developed to help people express their final wishes in five important areas.

1. Who Will Be My Health Care Agent
2. Medical Treatment I Do or Do Not Want
3. Expectations for Comfort Care
4. How I Want People to Treat Me
5. What I Want My Loved Ones to Know

1. This document is FCS2262, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611. First published: November 2006. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.  
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*Five Wishes*® booklets offer detailed explanations of each of these wishes. They will help you complete a document that will be legally accepted in 38 states (including Florida) and the District of Columbia. *Cinco Deseos*® is the Spanish language version of *Five Wishes*®.

All materials can be ordered toll-free at 1-888-5WISHES (1-888-594-7437) or online at <http://www.agingwithdignity.org.5wishes.html>. You can also contact Five Wishes, Aging with Dignity, P.O. Box 1661, Tallahassee, FL, 32302. Single copies of *Five Wishes*® or *Cinco Deseos*® cost \$5, with discounts for large purchases. Twenty-five copies cost \$1 each. (Prices are subject to change).

### Examine Your Personal Belief System

Today, our medical technology has gotten ahead of our ability to resolve life and death issues. Each of us must use our own beliefs and values to decide what to include in a living will. Before you sit down to fill out your *Five Wishes*® document, take time to consider your personal belief system.

Use the following exercise to think about your own opinions and beliefs. Your answers will help you examine your feelings more closely.

### How I Feel About Life and Death

This is a three-step activity. Complete the first two steps in private. The third step asks you to share this paper with the most important people in your life.

Step 1: Quickly read each statement and write down the very first response that comes to mind.

Step 2: Reread each statement. Look at your first response and then think through each statement. Change your response if you need to.

Step 3: Talk with the most important people in your life about these questions.

1) I know I can depend on my family and friends to make the decisions I'd want if I could not make them for myself.  
☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Not Sure

2) My religious faith helps me to think of life as... |

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3) My family members do not always agree on philosophical issues.  
☐ True   ☐ False

4) It is important to me to stay independent and in control in all situations.  
☐ True   ☐ False

5) I feel very strongly about using or not using medical machines to keep me alive.  
☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Not Sure

6) I believe that there might be times when I would prefer death over life.  
☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Not Sure

7) When someone talks about organ donation, I think about...

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FCS 2260: Balancing Work and Caregiving: Tips for Employees (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY872>)

8) My religious faith helps me to think about death as...

FCS 2261: Balancing Work and Caregiving: A Guide for Employers (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY873>)

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9) The people in my life who understand most about my beliefs and needs are...

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10) Thinking about my own death makes me feel...

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11) I will share my answers with the following people:

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## For More Information

**This is one of six publications in a series on caregiving and aging. The other publications in this series are:**

FCS 2257: Long-Term Care: Places to Call Home (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY869>)

FCS 2258: Caregiver's Contacts: How to Get the Help You Need (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY870>)

FCS 2259: Puzzled by Your Care Receiver's Refusal of Services? (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY871>)