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How to Discuss End-of-Life Planning With Your Clients

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Death is one of life's most significant events and should be an integral part of every investor's financial plan. Sharing your knowledge and caring about this sensitive topic will go a long way toward establishing strong long-term relationships with your clients.

As an experienced advisor, you're probably well aware that most clients' financial plans cover everything from supporting newborn children to retiring in style, but they almost never consider end-of-life details. In fact, unless you specialize in estate planning, you yourself may find it difficult to address such a sensitive issue.

But the reality is that approximately 2.4 million Americans die each year—and that number continues to grow. To do right by your clients, end-of-life planning is a subject that you must learn to broach. Here are some ways to handle the conversation with sensitivity and skill.

Understanding your client's mindset

First, it's important to understand why clients (and you, too) don't want to talk about end-of-life issues. Virtually everyone prefers to discuss positive events rather than difficult ones. It's human nature to look forward to significant life changes such as weddings, the birth of a child, and retirement, because they create a sense of excitement and arouse a passion for life. Hence, clients are naturally eager to talk about these milestones and want to plan ahead to ensure they are successful and memorable.

On the other hand, regardless of their age, very few people are comfortable discussing the inevitable end of their lives. Doing so requires that people confront their own mortality—and for most, that's understandably a frightening prospect. Unwilling to face the fear, many of us avoid thoughts and conversations about death at all costs. Because of this, most advisors and clients rarely, if ever, discuss end-of-life plans until a personal crisis occurs in the client's life.

Cultural change

Fortunately, a cultural shift is taking place that may enable us to confront these issues more openly. Our population is aging, and as baby boomers continue to [retire](#) in the coming decade, their investment strategy may shift from retirement saving to spending for their needs and their family needs during their golden years. And once more and more boomers are living post-career lifestyles, they may begin to focus on how their investments and choices will impact their children and grandchildren. As these thoughts work their way into conversations with family members and friends, they may be much more open to discussing end-of-life details than they were just a few years ago.

Working with clients

Nevertheless, you need to lead the way; your clients are unlikely to bring the subject up on their own. Here's how to get prepared for this indispensable conversation and make it as comfortable as possible:

1. **Practice before you preach.** It's best to get your own legacy plans in place before you initiate a discussion with your clients. Once you've been through the process, it will be easier to help them to learn about and create their own [legacy](#). Become familiar with the client's items that need to be addressed, as well as alternatives for each so you can offer valuable knowledge and examples in preparation.
2. **Focus on the benefits.** When you bring up the subject, emphasize all the good things that will come from the conversation. Remind clients that by planning their legacy, they'll be sure to:
 - Let their wishes be known
 - Lift the burden from their loved ones
 - Let their survivors grieve
 - Provide invaluable information to their survivors
 - Avoid family disputes
 - Protect their assets
 - Express their feelings
3. **Prepare for objections.** Understand that it is normal to encounter [resistance](#) the first time you bring up this topic with a client. If that happens, don't be surprised or discouraged. Instead, be prepared. Write down a list of anticipated objections and rehearse appropriate answers. If the conversation still falters, plan to try again at another time.
4. **Think ahead.** If your client is ready to talk, you should be, too. Write down three or four key [questions](#) that you believe the client needs to address. These questions might deal with health care treatments, funeral preferences, financial bequests, or practical matters such as household maintenance.
5. **Involve the appropriate people.** Clients might need moral support while considering these issues. Encourage them to include others in their decision-making process, especially one or two people they respect and with whom they feel comfortable sharing private details. (This may be a social worker, spiritual advisor, or close friend.) This will give them a sounding board, as well as help them when it comes time to share their plans with the family.
6. **Be a good listener.** One of the best ways to influence someone is to let them generate ideas on their own. Facilitate these conversations with your clients in such a way that they have the opportunity to come up with ideas on their own.
 - Pay close [attention](#) to what they want and need.
 - Make clear that what the client is sharing with you is important.
 - Interpret both words and emotions. The words people use are just one part of what they're saying. You can capture their whole message by also paying attention to the emotions behind the words.
 - Do not interrupt. Interruptions decrease effective communication.
 - Be open-minded; don't judge others by your values.
 - Summarize the conversation. Be sure you've heard something correctly by offering a quick summary of what the client has said.

Once clients have clarified their decisions, they should share them with their families as soon as possible. You'll also find that though creating an end-of-life plan can be a daunting experience, once clients undertake it, they'll often want to encourage their friends and family members to do so as well. They should follow the steps above when starting conversations around this topic. Here are a few more guidelines you should suggest:

- **Ask permission.** Recommend that clients ask permission to discuss this topic with loved ones, since doing so assures family members that their wishes will be respected and honored. They may want to bring up the topic by discussing how you recently helped them plan their end-of-life details or by sharing an article or story about the topic. Even watching a TV show or movie on the topic can encourage conversation.
- **Select the appropriate time and place.** When discussing end-of-life plans, find a quiet, comfortable place that is free from distraction. This is important for both your discussions with clients and for their family discussions. Also, your client should make sure that their loved ones are in the proper state of mind, not tired or preoccupied.
- **Don't criticize or condemn.** Clients may be frustrated if a family member has resisted end-of-life planning. Getting hot under the collar will not be persuasive. Emphasize that they should approach loved ones with gentle and sincere candor; that way they will be much more accepting of advice.

Worth the trouble

Once you include end-of-life details as a module in clients' financial planning, you will gain their respect; as uncomfortable as it might be at first, they'll be grateful that you helped them cover all the bases. Helping your client plan such details in advance lets them make their wishes known and leaves their survivors with fewer things to worry about—a blessing during such a difficult time for a family. It also gives your clients an opportunity to express their wishes for how their final arrangements should be handled.

Death is one of life's most significant events, and everyone, without exception, will go through it. It should be an integral part of every investor's financial plan. Your ability to focus on this sensitive topic will go a long way toward establishing strong long-term relationships with your clients. And you'll get the personal fulfillment of knowing you have helped clients plan their legacy so that their final days are comfortable and their families are taken care of.

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