



# Communicating Bad News

## A Guidance Pack

This booklet is intended to offer informal guidance in circumstances where journalists, their editors or managers are required to tell next-of-kin of the death of a colleague.

The advice is based on the experience and training of London's Metropolitan Police. The Dart Centre is grateful to the Met's Family Liaison Unit for its support.

Neither the Dart Centre nor the Metropolitan Police accept any responsibility for actions or outcomes which may follow from use of this document.

## Key Points in Summary

- The moment when someone is notified of the death of a close family member can be the most important in their lives.
- How the news is conveyed can have a significant impact on how an individual or family is subsequently able to deal with the trauma.
- The advice of experts is that only under the most exceptional circumstances should such a message be delivered by telephone. This is best done in person – and must be *before* the news has been reported in the media.
- If you cannot deliver the message in person in time, local police may be able to do this on your behalf.
- It's important that there are two of you to do this. Take a colleague with you – for mutual support, and for practical reasons (e.g. helping look after children).
- Note also that if you are telling a family or partner that a colleague is missing, and that you are seriously worried for their safety, then this is also best done in person and not by telephone.
- How you deliver this message is crucial. Prepare what you are going to say, and do not rush. The language you use matters. Be honest and truthful – and do not delay what you have to say.
- Remember also that you may be telling next of kin of the death of someone who was also close to you personally. Do not underestimate the powerful effect this may have on you.
- Make sure you have your own support. If you feel too distressed to do this, it's important - and OK - that you ask someone else to take over.

## ***1. How best to prepare yourself:***

Try beforehand to find out, as far as possible:

- Where the deceased/injured colleague is at the time when you are delivering the message, so that the family can go there if that is possible. Experience suggests that bereaved family members often want to do this.
- The circumstances of the injury/death, where they were, what they were doing, what happened, the details of their death/injury, the condition of the body. Bereaved family members often want to know this information in considerable – and accurate and honest – detail. Be prepared to help them find out everything they need to know.
- Make sure there is a second person there to support you. This might be either a colleague of the deceased who knows the family, or another member of your team.
- DON'T telephone the family/bereaved in advance to say you are coming. Try to find out discreetly (e.g. from management or HR) where they can be found in person. If you need to break the news in the workplace, ask the person's manager beforehand for a quiet space to meet.

## ***2. What to do when you get there***

- If the family or partner don't know you, identify yourself and ask if you can come in.
- Make sure you are delivering the message to the right person. Do not give the news to children first.
- Ask the family member(s) to sit down – and if delivering the news at the person's home, before sitting down yourself ask which chair to use. Sitting in the wrong chair (e.g. the one that the deceased always sat in) can cause upset.

- If the first contact is at the workplace, ensure that there are enough seats for everyone there, and have someone with you to support the family member.
- Do not delay what you have to say.
- In the case of death, use straightforward and clear language along the lines of:
  - “I am sorry to have to tell you that (make sure you use the name that the family know him/her by) is dead (or has been killed)” Or...
  - “I am afraid that I have very bad news. (Use name) is dead (or has been killed).”
- Be prepared for raw emotion (including anger). People hearing of the unexpected death of a loved one might display uncontrollable grief. They may be angry. They may be numb and unable to speak. Give them time and space to experience these emotions. Your presence is at this point more important than words.
- Be prepared for many questions.
- Be honest about what you know, and what you don't.
- Don't promise anything you can't deliver.
- Don't overwhelm the family with information – they won't be able to take it all in.
- Take time, and allow the family/those you are informing to respond at their own pace.
- Don't ask them to fill in any forms at this point – e.g. on National Insurance, death certificates etc. Come back to these later.
- Children should not be left out of this – but if they are young, be sensitive that that they may need looking after separately as your visit continues.

### *3. Language – things to say and not to say*

- Be open and honest; do not try to shield the family from the circumstances of the death. They may well find out the details through other channels.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself because of the enormity of what the family are taking on board.
- Say something like :
  - "I will be open and honest with you. I would like to tell you now what we know at present about what happened to (use name)."
  - "I know that this will be upsetting for you, so please stop me at any time and feel free to interrupt me if there is anything that I say that you do not understand or need repeating."
  - "You may want to write down some things - do you need some paper and a pen? Stop me if I go too fast."
- Let them control when they want detail and when they don't. Think of it as giving them the remote control for this.
- Appropriate words might include the following:
  - "Would you like me to tell you what we know so far about what happened to (use name)?"
  - If they say yes, add: " This will be upsetting, so please stop me at any time. Tell me if there is anything I say that you don't understand, or which you want me to repeat. Do you want to write any of this down?"
- Use plain, simple language, and tell them slowly, clearly and precisely what you know to be correct at this moment.
- Helpful phrases might include:

- May I say how sorry I am about the death of (use name).
- I cannot begin to imagine how you may be feeling at the moment.
- May I say how sorry I am that we are meeting under these tragic circumstances.
- Do *not* say : “ I know how you feel” or “Are you happy with that?” You cannot know how they feel. The words “happy” and death are not compatible.
- Do not try to finish off anyone’s sentences. Let them formulate what they want to say, even if this takes some time.
- Accept that you won’t have answers to all their questions. It can help both them and you if you write their questions down and say that you are waiting for that information (if you have already asked for it), or that you will find it out and let them know as soon as possible

#### ***4. Practical Things:***

- Such conversations are draining, and people will become tired, hungry and/or thirsty. Be prepared for frequent comfort breaks for the family and yourself.
- Ask the family if there is anyone else they want to contact, or to be with them there now.
- Explain that you (or another) will be the point of contact, and ask who will be the point of contact within the family so you know who to call.
- Make sure before you leave that you and the family are clear who else needs to be told, and how you might help with that if necessary. The family should generally be left to deliver the message to other family members themselves, but you may wish to offer help with transport.

- Be aware of cultural differences – different religions and ethnic groups have different customs around death, which need to be respected. Don't be afraid to ask what these are, and how you and your organisation might best work with them in support of the family.
- Under no circumstances should you let the bereaved drive themselves anywhere after receiving this news.

## ***6. Endings***

- At an appropriate point, you will need to clarify how long you intend or are able to stay. Saying that you are going to stay for another hour (for example) will set a timeframe for the rest of the meeting, which you can refer back to as you come to the end of that time.
- As that time approaches, refer to the amount of time left - for example : "we've still got 20 minutes, let's talk about that..." This will help you to end the meeting after the time you stated.
- Some phrases that might be useful to help end the conversation:
  - We have talked about a lot of difficult / painful things here. You may find yourself going over these in your mind.
  - Writing your questions down may help and we can discuss them next time we speak.
- You might ask the family what would they would like to do. "How do you want to go from here?"
- Sometimes the meeting will develop its own powerful family dynamic, and you will realise that it is better for you at this point to leave. Words might include...
  - "...perhaps we should leave it at that now?"

- "I am sorry, but I think perhaps we have gone as far as we can at the moment, and we'll have to leave it there for now."
- Make sure that you give them a contact number with details of when they/the family point of contact can call you. (This is to avoid creating unrealistic expectations that you will be available for calls at any time of the day or night).
- Leave a notepad and pen with the family, and suggest that they might wish to write down any questions for you to answer them next time you are in contact.
- Make arrangements for your next visit, and write that down so that they know when to expect you. Use your judgement as to when this meeting should be.
- If there is still much to say that you have been unable to communicate, then perhaps you should arrange to go back later. If you have given all the information you have at this point, and are waiting for other details, then make arrangements to see them in a couple of days
- Write down the date and time of your next meeting for the family to remember. Make sure you keep that appointment. It matters crucially for the family.
- Find out what the family members need to do after you leave - collect children, talk with other family members, etc.
- Find out if there is someone who can be with them / help them with this, or someone you could take them to.
- Ask if there is anything that they need you to do / want you to find out.
- Tell them what you are going to do next.



## ***5. Future Meetings***

- As with the initial meeting, try to structure your time with the family, with a beginning, a middle and an end.
- Always tell them how long you have this time. It will help them to feel contained, and it will not offend.
- If you say : “We have as long as you like to talk today”, then be prepared indeed to take as long as the family want, especially if family members are highly emotional, crying, angry etc.
- You may wish to say something like : “We have about an hour today”. And if you do, remind them when you are approaching the end, at the latest 10 minutes before you intend to close the meeting.
- Remember when considering how long to stay that an hour is a long time to spend with people in a highly emotional state.
- An hour also has its natural progression. Very often, most of what needs to be said/discussed can be done in that time, as long as all present know that that is the time that is available.
- If a crime and the police are involved, this can be a particularly traumatic time – be aware of that, and ensure best possible liaison with the police.
- Police press officers can manage the media for the family and also for your organisation. The press may want to talk to the family a lot – and the family will need support in this.

## ***6. Longer Term***

- It is important that the family feel supported by your organisation (if applicable) in the longer term – within the bounds of what is doable.
- Do stay in touch, especially in the early weeks and months, and remember that birthdays and anniversaries

can be very painful. A telephone call or a visit at these times can help a great deal.

- However, don't become their emotional life support system. If you do, they risk experiencing a second bereavement when you go.

### ***British Foreign Office Website Information***

(<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029391053>)

#### **Death Abroad**

The death of a relative or friend is always distressing. But if it happens abroad the distress can be made worse by practical problems.

After the death of a loved one abroad you are likely to have countless questions. What should I do now? How can I communicate with people in a foreign language? Who can I turn to for advice?

#### **If a relative or friend dies while you are abroad with them**

All deaths must be registered in the country where the death occurs. Your tour guide, the local police or the British Consul can advise you how to go about this. If you are anxious about coping in a foreign language or about any other problem, the British Consul will be able to help.

- Make sure you have as much documentation as possible about the deceased and yourself. This should include:

- Full name.
- Date of birth.
- Passport number.
- Where and when the passport was issued.
- If you are not the closest relative yourself, next of kin of the deceased person.

If the deceased was known to be suffering from an infectious condition, for example the hepatitis or HIV viruses, it is essential that the authorities be told so that they can take precautions against infection.

#### **If a close relative or friend dies abroad while you are in the UK**

- If the death has been reported to a British Consulate overseas they will pass the details to the UK police who will immediately visit the next of kin and break the news.
- If you hear of the death from a tour operator, the media, or any other third party you should contact the FCO on 020 7008 1500.
- Consular staff in London will keep in touch with the family and the Consulate abroad until burial or cremation overseas or until the deceased has been brought back to the UK.

- Consular staff in London will pass on to the Consulate overseas the wishes of the next of kin about disposal of the body. We will do our best to ensure these are carried out.

**How can British Consuls help?**

- They can keep the next of kin informed. Their job is to ensure you do not feel you are on your own.
- They can advise on the cost of local burial, local cremation and transport of the remains and personal property back to the UK.
- They can provide a list of local funeral directors. If an English-speaking firm is not available, Consulate staff will help you with the arrangements.
- Where there is evidence of suspicious circumstances they can press for an investigation by local authorities and pass on the results.

**But a Consul cannot...**

- Investigate deaths themselves.
- Pay burial or cremation expenses.
- Pay for the return of bodies to the UK.
- Pay any debts that may be outstanding.

The emotions you may experience after a major personal crisis such as the death of a loved one can be traumatic. It is important to remember that help is available.