



A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR DELIVERING DEATH MESSAGES

TO FAMILIES

Many families in which someone has died will say that the most traumatic moment in their lives was the notification of the death of their loved one. It follows that those people who are required to inform someone of the death of their parent, partner, child, spouse, sibling or friend say it is the most difficult and traumatic part of their job. It has been said that it is a lack of knowledge or understanding of bereavement issues that causes or adds to the apprehension of those given this daunting task. This pamphlet is intended to give some guidance in these most trying of circumstances. When dealing with the bereavement you may never be able to make it better for the families, but by following the advice within this leaflet you may not make it worse.

BREAKING BAD NEWS

First Contact

Nothing in this guidance should delay you in delivering a death message if there is a chance of the family finding out from any other source. You must tell them first.

Prior to delivering the death message consider the following points:

- Confirm that you are delivering the right message to the right person.
- Know where the victim is at the time of delivering the message so the family can go there if they wish.

- Attempt to establish if there will be any communication requirements as regards language or disability.
- Attempt to find out as much as you are able to about the circumstances of the incident to tell the family.
- Do not assume that a neighbour is the best person to help the family or be with them when giving the message. If you choose a neighbour it may not be a person that the family either know or like.
- Be prepared to face raw emotion.

What To Do

- If you are in plain clothes you must clearly identify yourself and ask to enter the premises.
- If you are in uniform ask to enter the premises.
- Ask the person or people that you are about to give the message to, to sit down.

What To Say

- I am very sorry to tell you that **“use name”** is dead or has been killed.
- I am afraid that I have very bad news. **“Use name”** is dead or has been killed.

Tips and Hints

- If the first contact is to be held in the family home, wait to be asked to be seated as sitting in the wrong chair, i.e. the one the dead person always sat in, can upset the family. If the first contact is at your workplace, ensure there are sufficient seats and the family are allowed to sit where they wish, especially if they have brought someone along to support them.
- Ask the family how they wish you to refer to them. It is often better to start off on the more formal basis, i.e. Mr or Mrs.
- Ask the family how they wish you to refer to the victim.
- Don't say, 'Don't worry, it may never happen' - for the families, it already has.
- Don't say, 'Are you happy with that' - the word happy and the bereaved do not go together.
- Don't try to finish family members' sentences for them. Bereaved people will take time to formulate what they want to say to you.

Future Meetings

- Try to structure your meeting with a beginning, a middle and an end. The information you wish to impart and receive from the family will be your objectives for this meeting. This may not always be achievable due to raw emotions taking over.
- Tell them how long you have, it will help them focus and will not offend. We have as long as you like to talk' - if you do choose to say this be prepared to take as long as the family want, especially if family members are highly emotional, crying, angry; this is very draining and they will become tired, thirsty or hungry. Be prepared for frequent comfort breaks for the family and yourself. You may wish to say 'We have about one hour today'. If you do, remind them when there are 5 or 10 minutes before the end.
- An hour is a long time to spend with people in a highly emotional state.

Openings

- I am **“first name”**, **“second name”**. I am the person in charge of the investigation into the murder/death/disappearance of use name. I am a **“give rank”**. Introduce anyone else present during the meeting and their roles in the same simple language.

Acknowledgement

- 'I cannot begin to imagine how you may be feeling at the moment' or
- 'May I say how sorry I am/we are about the death/murder of **“use name”** or 'How sorry I am/we are meeting under such tragic circumstances'.
- 'Can I assure you that I/we will do everything in my/our power to discover what happened to **“use name”** and convict/bring to justice the person(s) responsible for this. Something important for you as a family is also very important for us'.
- Again, be prepared to face raw emotion.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself again and again as the family have difficulty taking in the enormity of what you are telling them.
- Be prepared to write information down for the family on salient points.
- Ask the family if there is anyone else they wish you to contact or to be there with them now.

- Bear in mind that the Officer delivering the death message may be the first point of contact for the designated Family Liaison Officer in cases of Homicide or Road Death for background family information.

Remember that, however bad this is for you, you leave the family to deliver this message to perhaps a large extended family circle.

The Scene

- In these days of mobile communications, more and more families are arriving at the scene or the hospital. Ensure that persons purporting to be family members at either scene or hospital are treated appropriately from the outset.
- Police tend to look on the scene as either where the person was killed or the person was found dead. The family may look on the scene as the place where their relative was last alive.

Ending Difficult Conversations

- 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 I/we/your Family Liaison Officer **“use name”** will answer them the next time we/you meet.
- Sometimes the meeting will be taken over by the family for various reasons, and you need a way to extricate yourself. Here are some possible phrases to help you and them:

‘Where do you want to go from here?’

‘Perhaps we should leave it at that for just now’.

- When you really do need to end:

“I am sorry but I think we have gone as far as we can at the moment and we will have to leave it there for now”.

“We will be meeting again on perhaps we can revisit that then”.

Explanation

- “I will be open and honest with you. I would like to tell you now what I/we know at present about what happened to **“use name”**. Some of what I say may upset or disturb you. Please stop me at any time and feel free to interrupt me if there is anything that I/we say that you do not understand or dislike or need repeating. You may want to write down some things, would you like that? Do you need some paper/pen? Stop me if I go too fast”.

- Again, be prepared to repeat yourself because of the enormity of what the family are taking on board at this time. Also the family members may need to write information down for this same reason as well, as they have to deliver this information to their extended family. Use plain simple non Police speak language, explain slowly and clearly and precisely the truth as you know it at this time.

Endings

- Try to leave the family in a positive frame of mind and confident in the ongoing investigation, i.e. focus them on what they are going to do now.
- What do you need to do now when I leave, telephone, collect children, talk with another family member.
- Explain the role of the Family Liaison Officer and that they are there as the direct link to the investigation team.
- Ask the family:
Is there anything you need?
Is there anything you really do not want to happen?
What we are going to do now is
- If you are the first point of contact for the family, ensure they are aware when the next Police contact will be and who.

Media

An unfortunate consequence of death, particularly in cases of homicide, is that the media may contact the family at an early stage. Families should be made aware of it.

FAMILY LIAISON OFFICERS

Who They Are

- Police Officers trained in family liaison skills. They are part of the investigation team.

Why Are They Here

- Family Liaison Officers will include families as partners in investigations and provide as much timely information as possible.
- They ensure that families are treated appropriately, professionally, with respect and in accordance with their diverse needs.

Who They Aren't

- They are not counsellors. If there is a need for help and support from a counsellor or other specialist support, FLOs can help to make arrangements quickly and confidentially to put families in touch with experienced agencies with whom they regularly work.

WHAT THEY DO

The Family Liaison Officer's role includes:

- Gathering evidence and information in a sensitive manner that helps the investigation.
- Providing the family with a communication channel to the Officer in charge of the investigation and the investigation team.
- Doing all they can to guide the family through the complicated business of the Criminal Justice system, providing timely information and practical support concerning the investigation and associated procedures.
- Giving the family help and advice when they might need to talk or deal with other Organisations such as the Procurator Fiscal Service and Victim Information Advice Office.
- Making sure the family are given information about supporting agencies, for example Victim Support, so they can make decisions about what help and advice you may want.

We realise that we do not know all the answers and if you have advice or information that you feel should be contained within this document, then please contact the Family Liaison Team.

SOME USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

CRUSE

Bereavement support and advice

Tel: 0845 600 2227

www.crusescotland.org.uk

SAMARITANS

Support for those in crisis

Tel: 116 123

www.samaritans.org

BRAKE

Support the families of those killed or injured in road accidents

Tel: 0808 8000 401

www.brake.org.uk

VICTIM SUPPORT SCOTLAND

Offering help and advice on coping with the effects of crime

Tel: 01224 622478

www.victimsupportscotland.org.uk

SAMM

Support after the murder or manslaughter of a loved one

Tel: 0845 872 3440

www.samm.org.uk

CHILD DEATH HELPLINE

For those affected by the death of a child

Tel: 0800 282 986

If calling from a mobile 0808 800 6019

www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk