

Managing Difficult Conversations

A guide to compassionate telephone conversations

Talking to relatives – delivering bad news: a guide to making compassionate calls
We know it is better to speak face-to-face, but at this time a phone call may be required
Make sure you are the person best placed to make the call. Did you know/care for the patient?

Find somewhere quiet...
...Introduce yourself

Speak slowly, calmly and clearly

Ask

Be clear and concise

#hello my name is...

I'm calling from ...

Am I speaking with.....?
Are you OK to talk on the phone right now? If not, can you come in?
Is there anyone there with you?

I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but ... died atam/pm today. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this news on the phone.

Break down the conversation into small chunks



Helpful concepts

Honesty

Try to explain, in simple terms, some of the detail.

"I need to tell you, N is poorly enough to die."

"Their condition deteriorated very quickly"

"I was there with them when they died"

Tell them you realise this is difficult news to hear on the phone.

Remind them that you are there to support them too, as much as you can.

Acknowledge

Take time to intentionally acknowledge the situation:

"I realise this is really difficult news to hear on the telephone. Are you able to come in to.....?"

Check for understanding

Make sure the person is completely clear and understands the news you have told them. People can easily go into shock and this can sometimes leave people feeling confused

Comfort and reassure

Is there anything we need to know that will help us prepare properly ahead of you coming in?
Are there any special instructions that you would like us to follow as we care for the body?
Is there anyone else you'd like us to call for you just now?
If you are making your way here, who will come with you?

Please travel carefully and safely.

Allow silence

Listen

Empathise

Acknowledge

Affirm that you are ready and wanting to listen just now. They may be feeling a wide range of emotions: anger, shock, relief, bewilderment.
Assure them that these feelings are natural and normal.
"Please take your time"

Allow space – sometimes silence shared can be powerful. Allow tears to be heard.
Assure them that it is OK to cry.
"I appreciate this is hard news to take in over the phone"

"I can hear how upset you are."
"This is a really difficult time"
Be gentle and affirming in your tone as well as your words

Ending the call

Don't rush

Next steps

"Before I say goodbye, are there any questions you have or is there anything you still need to mention?"
Remind them of your name and your role, and how they can get back in touch with you if need be.

"Before I end the call, is there anything else you need to know?"
We will have more information here for you to take home too."

Afterwards

Remember to look after yourself too. These conversations can be exhausting.
Debrief with a colleague if you can. Take a few moments for yourself.