



Breaking Bad News

August, 2005

“*Bad News*” is any news that drastically and negatively alters the family’s view of the family’s and child’s future.

The sharing of bad news is stereotypically associated with a physician sharing a diagnosis of a terminal illness. In fact there are people in many professions such as special education teachers, therapists, social workers, public health nurses, etc., who share bad news.

Sharing bad news is a difficult task and one that often creates fear in the individuals who have that role. Some of the reasons for concern are:

- *I don’t know how the family will react to the news.*
- *No one wants to share bad news.*
- *I don’t want to take the family’s hope away*
- *I don’t know how I will deal with their intense emotional response.*

There are numerous strategies to implement when sharing bad news. In general individuals who have received bad news say these things are most important:

- Competence
- Honesty
- Attention
- Straight forward approach
- Clear and understandable language
- Time for questions
- Attitude

In past decades bad news was routinely withheld from people. However recent studies indicate that most people want to know the truth and the old paternalist model has been replaced by one of full disclosure and empowerment. This allows parents to have information about prognoses, treatment and intervention options and ultimately make informed decisions.

A growing body of evidence indicates the attitude and communication skills of the person delivering the bad news plays a crucial role in how well the parents will cope with the bad news. Despite the challenges, it is during these difficult times the parents can feel they are not alone. The goal is to aim for acknowledgement, not acceptance.

1. Prepare Beforehand.

- a. Carefully choose who will deliver that bad news. Considerations are:
 - Who has an existing relationship?
 - Is it a trusting relationship
 - Who has the knowledge to answer questions that may arise?
 - Who has a compassionate and empathetic personality
- b. Make sure to allocate sufficient time.

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- c. Find a private and familiar location...Get the space right.
- d. Be familiar with family and background.
- e. Verify findings/results.
- f. Have copies of reports and test results available.
- g. Plan what information will be share.
- h. Invite family members to bring along others they want present.
- i. Have tissues available.
- j. Limit the number of people...there is no need for an audience.
- k. Avoid interruptions...phones, pagers and people.
- l. Set aside personal 'baggage' and personal feelings.
- m. Avoid making assumptions about:
 - The impact of the news
 - Parents readiness to hear news
 - Who else should be present
 - Parents priorities
 - Parents understanding

2. Establish Awareness/Check perceptions.

- a. Review past information, observations and activities.
- b. Determine what the parents know or suspect. Possible questions:
 - *Have you any idea what might be wrong?*
 - *When did you first think something serious was going on?*
 - *When you first saw the symptoms/problems what did you think it might be?*
 - *What have other people told you?*
 - *Do you recall why we did the assessment/test?*
 - *Have you noticed how...?*

3. Sharing the Information.

- a. Let the parents know the situation is serious.
 - *I'm sorry I have some bad news*
 - *What I have to tell you will be difficult*
- b. Give basic information simply and honestly.
- c. Don't overwhelm by giving too much information at the beginning, be straight forward.
- d. Give information in small chunks.
- e. Look directly at parents.
- f. Allow some time for silence.
- g. Proceed at the parents pace.
- h. Check for understanding.
- i. Pause periodically to give time for questions.
- j. Ask for all concerns.

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- k. Avoid giving inappropriate reassurances.
- l. Be sensitive while sharing information.
 - Gauge emotional responses.
 - Read non-verbal clues; face and body language, silence, tears.
 - Respond to the parents feelings and predicament with acceptance, empathy and concern.
 - Be empathetic-It is appropriate to say:
 - I'm sorry
 - I don't know
 - Use touch appropriately.
 - Stop if the parent indicates they do not wish to continue.
 - Do not be afraid to show honest emotion or distress.

4. Support and Follow Up.

- a. Set up a time to meet and answer questions that arise after this meeting.
- b. Make a plan for what will happen next.
- c. Give hope based on realism even if a cure is not realistic, offer hope and encouragement by sharing information about available:
 - interventions
 - services
 - treatment options
- d. Assure people of your availability.
- e. Build a connection- Send the message that the parent is not alone in this.
 - *We will work through this together*
 - *Together we can move forward*
- e. Write things down and provide a written copy.
- f. Identify and set up support systems; family, friends, groups, etc.
- g. Provide resources.

Tips for responding to parent's feelings and emotions when receiving bad news:

Outbursts of strong emotion may be directed at the individual delivering the bad news. It is important to remember these are rarely meant personally. In response to these emotions:

- a. Listen attentively.
- b. Acknowledge their reactions.
- c. Ask questions that encourage them to disclose their feeling, worries and concerns.
 - *Does this information surprise you? I can only imagine how difficult this must be difficult for you.*
 - *What worries you the most?*
 - *What does this news mean to you*





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Responding to specific emotions

- If the parent displays a high level of anger or agitation:
 - Give them some space.
 - Give them some time.
 - Try to pinpoint the information or reason for the anger with gentle questioning.
 - Avoid straying too far from the truth in order to placate or calm the situation.

- If the parent expresses disbelief:
 - Remember...disbelief is not designed to question your judgment or findings.
 - Be empathetic—acknowledge how difficult this must be.

- If the parent expresses shock:
 - Be aware this is the result of the inability to cope with the intensity of the emotions they are experiencing.
 - Allow the parent times of silence to reflect and sort through what they have heard.
 - Offer support.

- If the parent responds with tears:
 - Recognize crying as an important and transitory phenomena.
 - Move closer to the parent.
 - Offer a tissue.
 - Consider touching the parent if this seems appropriate.
 - Try to find out what emotion is causing the tears.
 - Stay with the parent until they are calmer.

Numerous studies show that in general people desire frank and empathetic disclosure of bad news. Studies also show the majority of people prefer full disclosure of information. Parents will find their own way to cope and live with this news. Know that kindness and respect from the person delivering bad news will be long remembered.

Sources

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