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# Mastering Difficult Conversations: Delivering Serious News

## Why are We Here?

Over a decade ago, a family in our community had a terrible end-of-life experience with a loved one. They came away feeling like victims of poor quality end-of-life conversations and guidance. They felt like their loved one suffered needlessly.

*“He had multiple specialists and a primary care physician who clearly cared for him and wanted the best for him. Unfortunately, none of these physicians had the skills or courage to discuss the gravity of his medical problems and the meaning this all had for him.”*

*“They allowed their own personal discomforts with these important conversations to overshadow their duty to their patient.... We feel dumbfounded that the most basic and essential skills a physician should possess have been ignored.”*

## Anonymous Donation

### Hospice of Northwest Ohio

- 12 Providers across four medical systems were invited to participate in Vital Talk Faculty training.
- Goal – the Vital Talk faculty would take the Vital Talk training back to their medical institutions and teach medical students, residents, attendings, and nurse practitioners how to deliver serious news.
- Vital Talk is a proven, methodical and effective way to deliver serious news
- Today is a demonstration of the course

## Course Logistics

- Large Group - Short didactic session
- Small Groups
  - Build community
  - Learning from one another
  - Role playing

***We will be stretching our muscles and having fun while we're at it!***

# Let's Get Started!

## Setting the Stage for Success

Do you have what you need?

- Reviewed chart

- Discussed with other attendings

- Can all involved parties meet?

Arrange a meeting location with some privacy

- Enough chairs?

- This could take some time.

## Be Intentional

- Clear purpose for the meeting:
  - Delivering information
  - Understand what the patient/family understands about the patient's condition
  - Explore the values and wishes
  - Propose a plan going forward
  - Is it all of the above?

## The Conversation

- By definition, discussions of serious medical news are emotion-provoking conversations.
- Emotions are involuntary, and they occur faster than rational thinking.
- We must EXPECT an emotional response when we deliver serious news.

## The Conversation

- People cannot hear or process information when in a highly emotional state
- People feel disrespected when emotions are not acknowledged
- Emotions frequently accelerate if not addressed

***Respond directly to emotions when you see them!***

## The Conversation

- Remember...
  - Emotions - expressed directly and be obvious
  - Emotions - expressed indirectly and be subtly expressed
  - Emotions - can *sometimes be disguised as questions*

## Empathetic Responses:

- Validate the emotion
- Show respect for what the patient/family member is feeling
- Build trust between you and the patient/family
- Create a sense of commonality between you and the patient/family member by showing you understand them
- Connect with one another on a very human level

## NURSE STATEMENTS:

- Empathetic statements - acknowledge emotion in different ways
- Lessen the intensity of the emotion - enabling the patient to hear information and begin processing it
- Powerful tools – can use repeatedly
  - Diminish the level of emotion
  - “Re-set” the patient’s/family’s ability to focus/process what is being discussed

## Nurse Statements

- N** Naming
- U** Understanding
- R** Respecting
- S** Supporting
- E** Exploring

## Nurse Statements: Naming

- “I can see you are frustrated”
- “This is really hard.”
- “You sound frightened.”
- “I sense some misgivings about this plan.”

## Nurse Statements: Understanding

- “I can see this is not the news you had hoped to hear.”
- “I can see how much you love your family.”
- “It’s really hard to watch a loved one decline and not be able to stop it.”

## Nurse Statements: Respect

- “You are a wonderful advocate for your daughter.”
- “I really appreciate you being willing to spend your time to meet with us today.”
- “Your peace of mind matters to us.”
- “You have really been dedicated with following through with all the chemo sessions and follow-up tests.”

## Nurse Statements: Support

- “Our team will work with you through all of this.”
- “It’s important that you have all the information you need and I will get the answers to your questions.”
- “How can our team best help you care for your mom at home?”

## Nurse Statements: Explore

- “What worries you about the future?”
- “Can you tell me what you mean by that?”
- “I sense some hesitation or unspoken concern on your part. Can you tell me what that is about?”

## The Conversation – Phase I

- **Before you begin- learn the patient's and/or family's understanding of the medical situation.**
  - Assume nothing!
  - Meet him/her wherever he or she is at.

## The Conversation

- “It would really help me to know what your understanding of your medical situation is.”
- “Would you be comfortable sharing what you've heard from the other doctors?”
- “What have you learned since you had the last CAT scan?”

## The Conversation – Phase I

- You've determined what the patient's and/or family's understanding of the medical situation is...
- You've moderated emotions thus far using NURSE statements so the patient and/or family is in a receptive state to learn new information...

*How can you deliver serious news in an effective way?*

**What matters when we  
deliver serious news?**

**It needs to be clear  
*and*  
stated in a compassionate way**

## The Conversation: Asking for Permission

- Before we give serious information, we should seek confirmation that the patient or family wants to learn new information about the patient's medical condition.
- Asking for permission shows respect to the patient and family.
- Asking for permission tells the patient that he or she is in control of the conversation.

## The Conversation: Asking for Permission

“Would it be ok if I shared what I learned from reviewing your records?”

“I've spoken with your oncologist and looked over your records. Would it help you to know what I've learned?”

## The Conversation: **The Warning Shot**

- You can prepare the patient to receive serious news by “firing a warning shot.”
- The warning shot cautions the patient that consequential information is about to be shared and puts a spotlight on the significance of this information.
- The warning shot is a cue to the patient to focus on what is about to be shared.

## The Conversation: **The Warning Shot**

“This news will be hard to hear.”

“I’m afraid I have some difficult news to share.”

“Unfortunately what I have to share is not good.”

## The Conversation: **Headlines**

- Clear, concise statement - 1-2 sentences long.
- No extraneous information - distracts from the message
- Headline - focus on the serious news
  - answer questions later
- Delivered early in the conversation
  - After emotions are moderated
  - After you grasp current understanding

## The Conversation: **Headlines**

- The headline gives both information as well as meaning – 2 Parts
- The information is the **brief** medical news and the meaning is a **statement of the ramifications** for the patient.
- *Both components must be present.*

## The Conversation: Headlines

“The CAT scan showed that the cancer has progressed dramatically despite several different chemotherapies. Unfortunately, this means there is no further treatment available that will slow the spread of this tumor.”

## The Conversation: Headlines

“Your body has grown too weak to withstand the stress of hemodialysis. This means we are at a place where we must stop hemodialysis.”

## The Conversation: Headlines

“The bacteria growing in your blood is resistant to all antibiotics, which means this life-threatening infection cannot be cured.”

## The Conversation: Headlines

“Your husband’s condition has worsened in spite of our most aggressive treatments. We believe he is dying.”

## The Conversation: Post-Headline Pause

- Once the headline has been delivered, **PAUSE**.
- The Pause gives the patient a chance to take in the news and begin to reflect on it.
- The Pause
  - Acknowledges the seriousness
  - Will make you uncomfortable
  - Fight the urge to forge ahead; “sit in the silence” for a few seconds.

## The Conversation

Once serious news has been delivered and emotions have been tended to, the goal is to determine the patient's values, priorities, worries, and wishes. You can only formulate a proposed plan to move forward if you have an understanding of all these. Begin by easing into questions that will clarify the aforementioned. The information you gather now allows you to custom-tailor the proposed plan for this particular patient/family.

## Delivering Serious News

### Conversational Goal points:

- NURSE statements – use them from start to finish to moderate emotions. When in doubt, use a NURSE statement!
- Ask the patient/family what they understand
- Ask for permission to share serious news
- Fire a warning shot
- Deliver the HEADLINE and PAUSE
- Transition to the VALUES questions



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