

Passing on a message about sudden death

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Summary

Usually the message about sudden death of close relative is passed on by emergency service, hospital doctors, rescuers or psychologists in Critical Intervention Centers. Employees of these services are the first who witness tragedy of death at car accident scenes or other tragic events, they quite often must pass on this information to family of a deceased. They need to face the reaction of deceased's, they have a duty to response to very strong emotions connected with the message passed on phone or at personal meeting, at home, at rescue intervention unit.

In this article there are presented psychological rules of passing on a message about sudden death, information about emotions, reaction in situation of a loss, and a possibility of providing a necessary support.

Key words: disaster, disaster medicine, rescue, rescuer, prophylaxis, disaster classification.

Introduction

The biggest challenge in a situation of sudden, dramatic death is to pass on this message. Information about death is a message no one expects to hear. That's why it is so important to properly prepare medical rescuers, hospital doctors or psychologist in Critical Intervention Centers in case of this task [1,2].

People who pass on that kind of information will have to face such emotions as: despair, cry, fear, dizziness, apathy. It's hard to deal with twinge of these emotions and at the same time to give a support. At this time, the most appropriate help is to: give full and needed information about circumstances of decease, provide help and let people who suffer a loss to express all the feelings,

questions or even let them to blame us. To inform about death is heavy, emotional burden. The most useful means in preparation to pass on hard and tragic information is a knowledge about the process of mourning, awareness of what reactions and feelings we might expect. Then it is easier to understand the situation when we have to deal with hard duty, at the same time we are better prepared for the reaction which we are afraid of. The knowledge help us to find needed distance and get rid of fear of the duty [3]. However, we have to remember that reaction, emotions and behaviour are always different, that is why knowledge and experience are necessary but also are sheer, human sensitivity and empathy. You cannot be taught proper attitude and behaviour or precisely plan the scenario of the meeting be-

cause the people who mourn over their loss will steer our actions through their reaction.

Some of our behaviour may be the person who suffers the relative loss, whereas others may deteriorate their dramatic state. A relief can be brought through attention, respect for the suffering and severity of the situation we participate in. Ineffective or even harmful is giving a consolation or piece of advice, as well as trying to hush and block flow of intensive emotions, it is going to make us less efficient during this difficult mission.

In these cases what we need is empathy, sympathy – very important ability for all who in their professional duty have to help and support other people.

Empathic attitude prompts us when we should say something or remain silent in order to support a crying or inquiring person. Situation of a person who experiences loss is the most important and defines further plan of a meeting. The situation will suggest us if we should sit by the person and accompany when he intensely expresses his emotions and inquiries or rather leave the apartment when the deafening silence caused by shock and disbelief is kept longer. Perhaps our presence blocks the emotions which are too hard to express if we see it. Reaction on the passed message will give us a cue if there is needed a doctor, informing a family or neighbours.

Only the visit will let us see if there is a family in the house which can ensure mutual support. Being a messenger of tragic message, we have to be first supporters at the same time, people who will not leave the person in mourning all alone [1,2].

It is so important that in this crucial moment – so painful for people we pass the information and also unpleasant for us – we will do our duty possibly in the best way.

Prepare yourself mentally to pass on the difficult message

When we inform about someone's death, in the first place we should restrain own emotions. We have to prepare mentally to pass on this sad

message, having awareness that the process of mourning starts from this moment.

If possible, we should create convenient condition when we pass on this bad information and also – if we can do it – inform about it in person, not by phone. Regardless of way of informing, it is worth in the first place to prepare the person for a tragic message [4, 5, 6].

Introduce yourself

First of all – if you do not know family of the deceased – introduce yourself. Give your first name and surname, by this you will show to family the slightest kind of closeness. It is easier to receive a devastating information from a non-anonymous person, in addition it shows your concern and gives you credibility.

Make sure you know who you are speaking with

The closest relatives – parents, spouse, children – should be informed in the first place. That is unacceptable to pass on information in presence of random people. It does not help anybody, including the random witness of the situation. If you pass on the bad information in the house with a large family, explain relations between the people present in the room, ask your interlocutor if they should stay or leave the room. Your interlocutor has to decide if, when and how to inform other members of family. Children, especially very young, are informed separately, when adult family member had already been informed. The parent has a right to decide what, when and how much he wants to tell a baby.

Prepare your interlocutor for the message

Warn him that you bring bad message. “I have for you sad message, sir/madame”. If you are standing on the threshold do not answer the question: “Has somebody died?”. The moment from your entrance until you will both sit is a time of preparation for the mourning.

Sit down

The message you have to pass on is devastating but say it as quick and clearly as possible [7,2]. Use calm tone of voice, say it clearly and adequately loud. Do not let yourself for understatement. Use simple and short sentences (e.g. “Your husband had serious accident”) and explicit, clear expressions (e.g. “Your wife died at the place of accident”). Try to say it in a way your voice and words are appropriate, tactful and gentle. Avoid such words as “corpse”, use expression “Your husband/wife/child, sir/madame”. It is crucial to assure informed people that doctors did their very best to rescue spouse/parent/child and that rescued person hadn’t suffer.

Consider is it helpful to call for a rescue team. That is particularly essential in case of elder or ill people and pregnant women.

In situation of informing about death the aspect of emotional support is especially important. When you pass on this type of information you have to let members of family to express their feelings, they need to take their time.

Answer all the question about the circumstances of death

A person who passes on bad information is required to have detailed knowledge. Particularly in case of sudden tragedy, relatives may ask numerous questions. Therefore, it is fundamental to become familiar with all the details about the event which caused the decease. Nevertheless, it does not mean we should – without interlocutor’s wish – describe with details the accident or last moments of the deceased. Often, our report is the only source of information about the death circumstances of their relative. We give a description of the accident only when family makes clear wish but we have to remember that every detail is not proper to be given, choice of vocabulary is important as well. Being tactful is extremely important because each inexpedient expression or misrepresentation will cause a grief-stricken family only more pain. Relatives of the deceased may later suffer because of wrong imagination of his death.

A huge challenge during informing on bad news may be to remain tactful or keep self-control in face of sudden and impulsive reaction for the drama. One of defense mechanisms among mourners is anger and mutual accusation of – mostly fictitious – the tragic event. Under no circumstances let family for the quarrel or mutual reproach like: “If you hadn’t not asked him to go there, he would be alive”. Under the influence of strong emotions people often lose self-control, trying for all cost to blame someone else for the death of relative. One of the tasks of a messenger is to cut short the growing conflict before its escalation.

Do not use cliches

Phrase like: “time heals wounds”, “fortunately, you have other child” cannot be taken as a consolation. If you do not know what to say, do not say anything. Don’t try to talk if they don’t feel fit to do it. Listen what your interlocutor has to say. Don’t accent you feel sorry. If you can, offer specific help, for instance, how to gain family’s, friends’, neighbours’ care. After you pass on the message, do not left the receiver alone.

Adjust your behaviour to current situation

Reaction for the message of death are very various, the most common reaction is cry and shock. In state of shock, the message’ receiver doesn’t speak logically, you can observe the loss of orientation – automatically sits, he makes unnecessary, stereotypical gestures, can’t think clearly, asks for the same information, he seems to have difficulties with hearing and understanding the message. You must give him some time to express his emotions and urge to conversation. You have to left this person under someone else’s care.

One of the most frequent reaction for a death message is feeling lost and looking for support of the messenger. The task of messenger is not to take the support over the person, but to find someone who can give this support. Turn for help to family of receiver, his friends or neighbours and also inform them about proper institutions which can provide some help.

Quite distinct reaction is to keep calmness, keep complete composure in the face of loss. Then, the receiver controls his emotions, holds back tears and hides under the mask calmness. Sometimes it happens that the receivers just wait until the rescue team leaves so they can start mourning and give vent to concealed emotions

Notification of someone's death is the moment when mourning starts and the way of informing affects further grief over loss.

At this moment, grief-stricken people undoubtedly need support, even perhaps, there is

something you can do for them – at least listen to or comfort them with your presence. In some cases, if that is possible, there is need to organize a group of support – inform and involve further family or friends, in order not to leave the person all alone.

During passing on the message of tragedy you cannot assume one scenario. The most important is to pass on all the information in a tactful and respectful way. That is the moment they are going to remember forever. Therefore, you have to realize the importance of that kind of message and its influence over the life of our interlocutors [8, 9].

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