

# Messengers of Death

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## **"Kill him!"**

In ancient Greece messengers who delivered bad news to a king sometimes heard the pronouncement for their deaths though they were but faithful servants. A king would take out his wrath upon hearing the bad news on the bearer of the news. Today, officers notifying a family about a death wish they were dead and often must bear the brunt of intense emotions when a family hears the news pass their lips.

No one wants to tell a person that a loved one has died, and nothing makes the task easy. No policy, procedure, phrasing, or formula can stop the pain, shock, and trauma for the survivors. The task is compounded because our society denies death and hides from it. People don't learn in advance healthy ways of dealing with the death of a loved one. They are plunged into the pain and emotions when the time comes and do the best they can.

## **Information**

A family needs accurate and useful information when they are notified. Your major function as a police professional is to provide information compassionately. You need to get as much accurate information about the death as you can and convey it to the family in a useful form. Your knowledge and experience can be invaluable in helping a family navigate the unfamiliar world of legal bureaucracy. Friends, ministers, doctors, and funeral directors will take care of other needs.

A worst case scenario occurs when the officer who notifies a family is not the investigating officer and the agency notifying the family is not the agency investigating the death. Much information can be lost when an investigating officer in one agency requests that someone in his agency call another agency to notify a family. The person who receives the call will get the information and relay it to an officer to notify the family. In this scenario the family is receiving fourth-hand information. If this scenario seems confusing when you read it, think about how confused the information reaching the family will be in real life.

# Admit Your Emotions

The first feeling you need to admit is that you don't want to notify the family. All people, including professionals, feel uneasy and avoid the task of telling family members that a loved one has died.

Permit yourself to express your emotions, especially if you have been truly affected by the death or preparations to notify the family. Showing emotions is acceptable. Family members need to receive the information and help that you can provide as a professional, but they appreciate the concern of a person.

# Empathize

Put yourself in the family's place and begin to feel their reactions and needs. Go a step further, if it isn't too hard, and imagine what your family would need and how you would want them treated under similar circumstances.

People often turn inward to deal with their emotions in reaction to stressful situations. You need to avoid this tendency to focus on yourself and anticipate the circumstances, needs, and reactions of the family.

As you prepare to notify the family, develop a general strategy and organize your information. Ask yourself some questions. What impact will my news have on the family? What is the emotional and physical condition of the people I will tell? What will the family need to know immediately after the initial notification? Who can help them?

Reactions to death, amputations, divorces, and traumatic accidents are very similar since they all involve grief for some loss. Draw from your experiences with any such situations to prepare for the notification you are making.

# Anticipate

No one method will work equally well for all notifications because each grief situation has a unique set of circumstances. For example, if a person has recently suffered the loss of a loved one, you might be dealing with the unresolved grief from the earlier death. You can become confused when the person doesn't react normally to your statements. Again, a spouse who is newly married to the dead person will likely react differently than a spouse who has been married for 35 years. Perhaps the dead person was not married and you will be dealing with a cousin.



Another complicating factor is differences in personalities. Some people are dependent and want others to take care of needs such as calling family and friends. If you suggest that others be present as you talk with the person, you might need to call them. Other people take charge and want to do everything themselves. You might find yourself as the target of hostility if you do too much for such a person. One lady told an officer to sit in a certain chair while he talked. He politely declined and began talking to the gathered family. The woman stood up, pointed at the chair, became red in the face, and ordered the officer to sit down. He wisely avoided further confrontation and sat down. The rest of the process went smoothly. When the officer was departing, the woman realized how she had acted and apologized.

Occasionally people will ask your opinion as to whether children should be present as you deliver the news. Don't predetermine whether they should or shouldn't be. That decision belongs to the adults who are responsible for them. If you are inclined to answer, you could say, "Since you have asked my opinion, let me say that I don't have any reason for them not to be here." Experience shows that children often accept and adjust to losses more easily than adults. If you are faced with talking with a child, be honest using terms she can understand.

Know as much of the circumstances as you can before you begin talking. Be sensitive to the differences in personalities as you talk with people. Be prepared to alter your basic strategy if you encounter circumstances that you did not anticipate.

## **Choose Place**

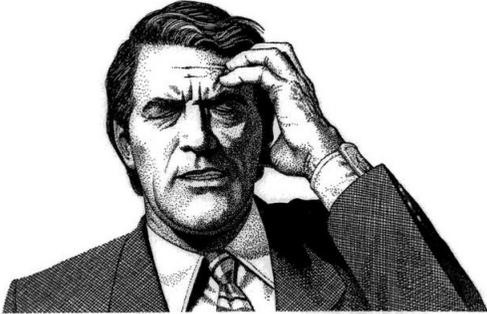
Look at the actual place where you will deliver the bad news, and try to choose one that will help you deal with the reactions of the people. Find a place with adequate chairs, couches, or benches. The news of a death is often devastating, and you don't know which hearer might need to be seated. Sit down and encourage everyone present to sit when you deliver the news. If possible, find a place that provides privacy.

People will almost always need a phone after the news has been delivered. Drinks such as coffee, sodas, or water help people to remain calm.

## **Inform Simply And Clearly**

You must be accurate with the information you give to people. Shock can set in quickly distorting comprehension and interfering with communication. Speak slowly so that people can hear you clearly, but avoid long pauses while you try to think of exactly the right words.

Tell them the news as simply as possible avoiding any kind of jargon. If you tell a woman that her husband was "DOA" at the hospital, she might ask you later what condition he is in. Many people don't know that DOA is an acronym for "Dead On Arrival".



longer with us." The woman frantically asked the nurse where they had moved him.

Always be truthful. People will eventually discover the facts and will resent you if you lied to protect their feelings. They might be embarrassed later while handling practical matters if they have false facts. You don't have to give all details for incidents such as gory accidents, but you need to tell the truth when you say anything. Don't avoid answering a question if you have the information. Don't be afraid to say that you don't know if you don't know.

## Allow Questions

Questions are a normal part of communication that allow people to clarify and to move to information they need. No matter how well you have prepared and delivered the message, people will ask questions. Questions help people deal with information that might not seem significant to you. You might omit details that are very important to people for personal and unique reasons. The hearers are not doubting or ignoring you. Rather they are clarifying and amplifying their understanding and retention.

Some of the common questions are: What happened? When? Where? How? Who was present? Did the person say anything? Was there pain? Did the person suffer? These questions deal with facts that you may or may not have. One very common question is, "Why did this happen?" This question expresses debates spanning the centuries about such issues as the existence of evil, the will of God, and divine intervention. You are not expected to settle these issues with answers such as, "It was God's will." You probably won't be able to answer the question, so simply say that you don't know.

Be patient even when you have already answered the questions. A mind under stress does not always work optimally. Questions help a person to determine reality because the repetition of facts helps to turn painful information into truth.

Euphemisms don't help and might complicate communication by misleading people. A person is just as dead when you say "passed away" instead of "dead". If people are unfamiliar with the colloquial terms that you use, euphemisms can confuse people. For example, a woman was going to her husband's room at the hospital. A nurse stopped her and said, "Your husband is no longer with us." The woman frantically asked the nurse where they had moved him.

You will seldom have all the information a family needs. When they ask questions for which you don't have the information respond with: "I am sorry. I don't know the answer to that.", "I don't know. I wish I had thought to ask.", or "I'm sorry. We didn't get that information."

## Deal With Reactions

People tend to have some common reactions when they are notified of a death. Few people will experience all of these reactions in your presence, but most people will experience some of them. Don't fear the reactions. Usually they are normal expressions of grief and help people deal with seemingly intolerable news.

Shock is common. The news people are hearing is too much to digest at one time. They might act dazed, calm, or like a robot with rote behavior. Sometimes people in shock will be just the opposite, hysterical, or will talk impulsively and compulsively about the dead person.

People often protest and deny that the news is true. They may refuse to believe and accuse you of lying. They may devise reasons why the news is false or inaccurate and often demand details.

Some people tend to isolate themselves by pulling away from family, friends, and support. They turn inward to handle their pain.

Often people express anger at the police, the criminal, self, and even the victim.

Guilt is the probably the hardest reaction to deal with since it involves underlying interactions in the relationship. People may begin to say, "If only ...", "We should have ...", or "What if ...". Family members may blame themselves for the death if they had harsh words with the dead person the last time they saw him. Adults sometimes have strong guilty feelings that they caused the death in cases of suicide, children, or accidents. Children often believe that their wishes that someone was dead caused the death. People sometimes feel guilty because of harsh feelings for the dead person or unfinished business with the dead person. They might even believe they did something to deserve punishment.

Physical reactions might include crying, sighing, choking up, shortness of breath, inability to focus vision, and inability to speak. Crying is the most common reaction. Be prepared to allow people time to release their hurt so they can realistically deal with the information you have for them.

## Ask Questions

Questions can help you verify the accuracy of your communication. Ask the people who received the information to repeat crucial information. If they can,

they probably heard and understood you adequately. The responses that people give can help you judge their emotional and mental well being. You might receive insights into some of the immediate needs of the family.

## **Attend To Immediate Needs**

Be ready to help the family with problems and needs that arise when you notify them. A common way to help is to call nearby family and friends so they can assemble for mutual support. You might help if someone needs medical aid. A child might need to be picked up at school. Almost always you will be able to give the family some idea of what to do next. If you have told a person who is alone, try to stay with her until someone arrives.

Usually grief-stricken people are more dependent than any time in their lives since being young children. You should be prepared to give immediate comfort and strength. The information you provide and the provision for help later are invaluable.

## **Provide Follow-Up Information**

Make sure that the family can contact someone with the agencies involved who is knowledgeable about the death. No matter how well you communicate information, people will likely forget key facts. Even if you provide the information in written form, they might be confused in the midst of their turmoil and need to talk with someone who can explain again.

Agencies can develop standardized forms for gathering and transmitting important information for a family. The same forms could be used to record information and be passed on to the family with notes added by officers involved. A kernel of valuable information would reach the family intact with helpful facts added. A form should gather certain basic information.

The name, address, and phone of a contact person in the agency investigating the death must be included. The contact person should be someone with knowledge about the death. If the contact person is not the investigating officer, then include the name, address, and phone of that officer.

If the investigating agency is different from the notifying agency, include the name, address, and phone of a contact person in the notifying agency. If the investigating officer is different from the notifying officer, include the name, address, and phone of the notifying officer.

Include all report numbers, records numbers, and identifying numbers that will help the family get the facts and handle legal and practical matters.

If the situation might qualify for assistance from a crime victims agency, include the address and phone of the agency.

The details about the death are very important, but people often fail to get all pertinent information. Try to answer the following questions and include the information on the form:

When? Where? What happened? How? Who was present? Did the person say anything? Immediate death? Was there pain? Any life saving attempts? Where is the body? Condition of the body? Arrests? Charges?

As the form with its information is being routed to the family, any person who can add helpful information should freely write on the form. The family will benefit in many ways.

If "messengers of death" perform their duty competently and compassionately, they can help a devastated family move into a new life.

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