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If there is one thing arguably more difficult than receiving bad news, it is having to break bad news to someone. If you have ever had to do this, you will know how distressing it can be for the ‘breaker’ and the receiver. Your stomach churns as the moment approaches; you worry about how the person will react; you wonder how it would be if the situation were in reverse; and perhaps memories of bad news you have received in the past come flooding back. Without doubt, this is not territory you would choose to be in.

But sometimes, as part of your job as people-workers, you are called upon to undertake this important but painful task. And while there are no easy golden rules to guarantee that such occasions will go well, some guidelines to help you are set out below.

First of all, it is helpful to explore some of the situations where, as a professional, you may be called on to break bad news. There are occasions when you may have to tell someone that:

- you are taking their child into care;
- their relative has died;
- they have a terminal illness;
- they are being made redundant;
- their teenage son has been arrested;
- they cannot receive the services they had hoped for.

As a nurse you may well be called upon to sit with someone who has just been told of a life-limiting illness, or has just lost a close relative.

### Activity

1. The list above provides just a few examples. Spend a few moments adding to it, both from your own experience in your work setting, and from likely scenarios that you know other colleagues have had to deal with.

2. Look again at your list. Try to identify what it is that worries you most about having to break bad news. Jot your thoughts down before you move on to the next section of this discussion.

You have now set the scene for exploring this difficult aspect of communication skills. The section that follows outlines a way of approaching such situations in an appropriate professional manner, which puts the other person’s needs ‘in the driving
seat’, but also helps you best prepare. The news you are about to break will come as a shock; you cannot disguise that, nor minimise the impact it might have. What you can do, however, is to remember that, if you do your best and follow the guidelines we suggest, you will earn the gratitude of that person (in due course, if not straightaway) for the way you have handled it. How you deal with this situation will make a difference to the person receiving the news.

**PREPARATION**

Although you may not know the person to whom you are going to break bad news well enough to predict how they will respond – they may get very distressed or ‘go into their shell’ in a protective silence, for example – you should know yourself well enough to realise that good preparation is essential both at the ‘head level’ and at the ‘heart level’.

**Head-level preparation**

‘Head-level’ preparation is about being as sure as you can be concerning the information you are going to be asked about, once you have broken the bad news. Try to put yourself into the other person’s shoes and anticipate what their questions might be; find out in advance as much information as you can. This will involve being very clear about what you do know and can find out about, and what questions will have to remain unanswered. For example, if you are breaking news about a person involved in an accident, or who has a serious medical condition, it is likely that there will be many things you do not know about, and which may be beyond your professional expertise anyway. In such situations, you must be honest and say you do not know; but you may be able to refer them to other colleagues who will be able to provide these important answers.

There is another set of difficult questions, however, that no one will ever be able to answer fully, and these are the big ‘why?’ questions that people often ask in moments of profound shock. Frequently, these questions pose deep existential concerns for that person’s world view, which may be on the brink of disintegration in the face of such bad news. For example:

- Why did God allow this to happen?
- Why did God take this person away and leave me?
- What have I done to deserve this?
- Why did it happen to him/her – he/she was such a lovely person?

These and many other searching questions brook no easy answer, but, nevertheless, can place the breaker of bad news in a difficult situation. It is worth some prior thought, therefore, to prepare yourself for responding to such painful, challenging moments. This is important whether or not you yourself belong to a faith community or believe in God, Allah or a Supreme Being. It is tempting sometimes, for example, to offer someone in distress an insight into your own world view in the
hope that it will comfort them in their moment of anguish. A devout Christian or Muslim, for instance, may believe that whatever happens must somehow be the will and purpose of God or Allah. ‘Insha’Allah’ is how Muslims would express this: it is God’s will. By definition, there can be nothing that happens that falls outside the will and purpose of the Divine Being. But to state this to a person who has no such belief could alienate them from you at the very moment when you have the opportunity as another human being to be open and supportive to them. By contrast, the person who has received the bad news may have a faith which can accommodate this disaster, and tells you so, but you may feel appalled by this world view to which you would feel totally unable to subscribe yourself. Then there are searching questions for people who belong to a faith community but whose belief in God is shattered by the awful news they have just received. They may ask you how they will be able to cope from now on.

The variations are endless, but in many ways the issue for you is the same. Whatever your own world view is; whether or not you subscribe to a religious faith; no matter how painful or upsetting you may find the scenario to be personally, your principal responsibility is to the person who has just received the news you have brought to them. It is not for you to bring your own ‘agenda’ into play with how you do, or do not, view the world, and whether you do or do not have a religious faith. Your task is to be as open as possible to the hurt, the anguish and the confusion that the person is experiencing. Easy answers are a misnomer: they are not answers, and they are usually offered to make you feel better, not the person you are working with.

The most helpful responses, therefore, will be the ones that treat the other person with the utmost seriousness and respect; that listen to their pain and distress and do not seek to offer trite statements, however well-intentioned; and which seek to ‘hear the music beyond the words’ when such questions are posed. In other words, if you can respond to, and acknowledge, the pain and confusion that these questions represent, you may be far more helpful because the person begins to feel that you really are listening to them, and have begun to realise the depth of their loss.

Heart-level preparation

These issues have already brought us into the second aspect of preparation, the ‘heart-level’ or emotional preparation. It is important that any disquiet, nervousness or even fear at having to undertake such a task as breaking bad news does not get in the way. Nor must you allow your own distress or upset to intrude into the interview or meeting that you are about to conduct. In other words, you need to take your emotional temperature, and talk through with someone you can trust how you are feeling about this task. Far better to do your crying as part of your own preparation than let your own emotions spill over into the interview when you are having to deal with the tears of the other person. But even if it is not likely to reduce you to tears, it is still important to talk through with someone else how you are going to handle the situation, what words you are going to use to break...
the bad news and how you will seek to respond to some of the issues that will inevitably arise.

This is not to say that everything will go as you have planned – far from it – but you will be surprised how much better you will handle the encounter if you have taken the trouble to do some of this important preparation in advance.

One further tip: it is useful to jot down some key information to leave with the person you are going to see. The chances are that they will be in shock and will not remember details very well. If you have left information for them in writing, including some contact details for yourself or others, that will be a great help. But you will need to give careful thought to what you write down.

**PLANNING FOR THE MEETING**

Much of what follows is based on a protocol for breaking bad news developed to help medical professionals in their roles, but it is relevant and easily adaptable to other people-work contexts. The SPIKES protocol – setting, perception, invitation, knowledge, emotions, strategy/summary – was originally developed by Baile and Buckman (2000), and you will find it helpful to consider the issues they raise when you are involved in breaking bad news yourself.

**S: the setting**

Where the interview or meeting takes place clearly makes a big difference. If it is to be in your own office, you will have far more control over what happens. You will be able to ensure a private uninterrupted space, where the phone is on ‘divert’ and staff know you are not to be interrupted.

You will be able to ensure that a box of tissues and refreshments are available, and that the layout of the room is appropriate. But you may also need to take into account whether the person will be able to return home safely or whether they will need someone to be with them for support while they are in a state of shock.

You may find, however, that you have to conduct this discussion in a less favourable setting. You may have to break bad news to someone on a hospital ward, or in a day or residential setting; or when visiting someone in prison where you have far less control over the environment you will be working in. It is important, therefore, to do everything in your power to seek a private room in which to conduct the interview. Contact the staff in advance; explain that you have some sensitive issues to explore, and that you will need privacy. This will be especially important if the person has hearing difficulties: you will not want to have to raise your voice to impart such difficult news. But if privacy cannot be guaranteed, you will need to think about how to position yourself so that you can speak in as quiet a voice as possible during the interview.

If you are breaking bad news in someone’s home, there are other considerations to bear in mind. One distinct advantage is that the person will be on home territory, and will not have to make the journey back from your office to their home after
hearing the news. But home territory brings other hazards. Music, pets, television, other people being present, children, casual callers, phone calls: all of these can impact upon the meeting you are trying to conduct. Again, you will need to introduce the reason for your visit early on, and, if need be, invite the person to prepare themselves appropriately. You may need to ask for the TV to be turned off. It is not your territory, but do try to take some control so that you have a reasonable chance of doing your difficult job effectively.

Sometimes the setting will be a telephone call, and this too needs careful thought. You will be surprised perhaps by the sheer volume of information that your tone of voice can convey over the phone. If you do not believe that, then think about occasions when you have been expecting news (good or bad) to be conveyed to you by telephone. The chances are that you will sense the outcome of the phone call in the first few seconds, simply by the tone of voice of the person making the call, and how they go about the task of talking to you. If you are using the phone to make an urgent appointment to visit someone to break bad news face to face, you will need to decide how much to say to them in advance. If you make it sound too light-hearted, they will not be at all prepared for what you have to say; if you do manage to convey the seriousness of the situation, you may find yourself giving most, if not all, of the information in that phone call, especially as they will inevitably ask you questions about why you want to pay them a visit. Here again, preparation about what you will say and how you will say it are invaluable. If you do have to tell them the news over the phone, you will need to ask them if they have anyone with them or whether they are sitting down, because you have some bad news for them.

Finally, you may find that, as is often the case with the police, you are having to ‘cold call’. Unlike the police, however, where the unexpected visit from uniformed officers immediately conveys some important information, this may not be the case with you. Again, you need to be prepared, with a form of words to use which deals sensitively but clearly with the reason for your visit. Also, you must ensure that you have your ID card or badge with you so that they know they are receiving a visit from a bona fide worker.

P: the other person’s perceptions

You will have had time to rehearse what you need to say and how you are going to handle the meeting. But for the person on the receiving end, this could be a bolt out of the blue for which they are completely unprepared. In such situations, it is likely that they will not take in the news you are giving to them. It is important, therefore, that you try to assess the person’s perceptions, and how they seem to be absorbing and understanding what you are seeking to convey. Their reaction may suggest that they have not fully appreciated the seriousness of what you are telling them. It is helpful, therefore, to go over the ground as many times as is necessary, if need be by asking them to ‘play back’ to you the key features so that you know they have taken it in. As mentioned in the section on preparation, it is useful to have some key information available to give to them in writing, as they may be in shock for a while and unable to take in fully what you are saying.
I: invitation

Another issue to bear in mind is that all professionals have their own jargon which they use as easily and at times as unthinkingly as drawing breath. With the best will in the world and with every intention to communicate clearly, you may still sometimes fail to guard against this when talking to people. This means that you must be prepared to go over the ground more than once, and to invite them to ask questions if they feel they have not fully understood some of the terms you have used. ‘There is no such thing as a silly question’ is a very useful golden rule to share with them.

Sometimes, of course, further information is not always appropriate. The person may feel they have got enough to deal with and do not want to know any more, at least as far as the immediate moment is concerned. In medical contexts, there is often the issue of the extent to which people understand the full implications of a medical diagnosis, but other professionals have similar situations to deal with, where people may not always fully appreciate the implications of what is being told to them. It is important, therefore, to leave the invitation open; to invite people to think about what has been said, and to jot down any issues that they may wish to ask you about next time you meet.

K: knowledge

How you convey information to the person is important; the timing of it and how you control the flow of information can make all the difference between a successful and unsuccessful interview. As an example of this, think about meeting with an insurance sales representative, or a double-glazing salesperson. How often have such interviews led to the potential buyer feeling bamboozled and totally confused by information overload? They reach a point where they find it impossible even to ask a sensible question, and just long for the meeting to end so that they can catch their breath. This is the worst possible scenario for you to emulate when breaking bad news.

It is important, therefore, to convey information in bite-sized chunks that the person can understand, and which you can easily check off as the interview unfolds. This is a major communication skill because it requires you to be aware of how the person is absorbing information. You want to avoid going too slowly, which can feel patronising, or too swiftly, which can feel insensitive. Finding the ‘middle way’ is the key to a successful interview, and this will be different for each person you work with. The main point always to bear in mind, therefore, is that the imparting of information is only half the story: how it is received and understood is the other half, and if you do not take responsibility for checking this other half of the equation, you will not have done your job at all well.

E: explore emotions and empathise

How someone receives the information you are giving them will often be indicated and measured by their emotional response. It is important, therefore, that you have
prepared yourself to deal with this aspect of the interview in a sensitive way. Sometimes the immediate bursting into tears is easier to deal with than someone going into an impenetrable silence. But even tears can be challenging, especially if there are gender issues involved. Not all men find it easy to cry; some more readily express an angry response. Some people find it difficult to be with men who are able to cry; occasionally it stimulates upset or distress within us. The skill of saying nothing while the person expresses their tearfulness or anger should not be underestimated. It is sometimes helpful simply to acknowledge to them that you realise how painful this is for them, and that you are not trying to rush them through such an emotional response to the news you have broken. Just saying to them that you realise this news will inevitably have been deeply upsetting and disturbing will be a small step towards achieving a degree of empathy with them. And to have someone perceptive and sensitive enough to stay with them during these emotional moments can make all the difference to how they deal with things subsequently.

S: strategy and summary

Interviews need to come to an end, and how this type of interview concludes is very much up to your skill and judgement, and how much time you have allowed for the meeting. There is always the chance, of course, that in a person’s home the end of the interview may be precipitated by a child bursting into the room, or the dog creating a diversion, or the phone ringing. But even so, you will want to ensure that the meeting closes in as caring and planned a way as possible. You do not want to be walking away when the person is still deeply distressed.

You need to have a strategy, therefore, for dealing with what needs to happen next. This may involve contacting other professionals; arranging a further meeting; fixing a time when you will ring them to see how they are. In extreme cases, you may need to contact medical services to arrange for an assessment or other medical intervention. It is always useful to offer a brief, sensitive summary of the story so far, and what you have agreed to do next, and to leave information in writing, especially any important contact details.

Group exercise

With the help of your tutor or supervisor, identify some scenarios from your work settings, real or imagined, where bad news would be involved, and use the SPIKES model to explore how you would undertake that task.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we indicated at the outset, there are so many different scenarios for breaking bad news that it is impossible to think about, let alone plan for, every eventuality. What can be said, however, is that in breaking bad news, it will be your approach, your
values and your personality as a worker that will shine through clearest of all. If you develop the skills to do it well, you will earn the gratitude of those you work with more than you will perhaps ever realise.

There can be no denying that such work is stressful and at times upsetting. It is no disgrace to feel emotionally drained after such an encounter, or to find that you have suddenly become ‘weepy’ afterwards. It is crucial, therefore, to take good care of yourself, personally and professionally, by finding an appropriate person to talk to afterwards, to offload and to get back into shape emotionally to work with other people.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


RELATED CONCEPTS active listening; dealing with upset service users; empathy; non-verbal communication; religion; spirituality; supervision

ENGAGING WITH THE PCF skills and interventions; values and ethics

ENGAGING WITH THE NMC CODE prioritise people

Service user snippet

Alison (45):

‘It was the worst day of my life. My beautiful Annabel had been rushed into hospital all of a sudden … and after what seemed like hours of waiting the surgeon and a nurse came out to tell me what had happened. I could see from their faces before a word was spoken that I had lost my precious daughter. After the surgeon left, the nurse stayed behind. She was so kind – she stayed with me – held my hand … explained everything – she made such a difference … I can't thank her enough.’