



Well@Work Podcast

Episode 25: Managing Difficult Conversations – The Death Notification

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA.

I'm Josh Fisherkeller a social worker here at the center. And on this episode of the podcast, I will discuss some strategies and tips for managing and preparing to give a death notification. Being responsible for sharing the news of a death is a stressful experience, however this is a daily reality for many health care workers. And this has become a more frequent experience in the last year with the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying staggering loss of life.

Regardless of whether or not the news is expected, it's both painful and traumatic for family members to hear and for notifiers to convey. Understandably, when healthcare professionals contemplate this scenario, their focus is on addressing the comfort and the needs of the recipients of the news, the grieving family members, and the loved ones of the deceased. But this focus can overlook the impact on the health care workers on the other side of these difficult conversations, who frequently describe having to notify family members of deaths as one of the most stressful parts of their jobs. In addition to sharing some of the most painful and traumatic news that a person can receive, they also must be prepared to deal with a variety of possible reactions and heightened emotions. That's why it's so important that notifiers consider their own mental health and wellness as they prepare for these conversations.

Take health care worker Alexandra for an example, she's recently started working in a busy emergency room and has only had her job for two months when a patient dies unexpectedly. Without much guidance, she is told she will have to notify the family because a colleague is absent. Reading through a script with suggestions for the discussion and the details of the case, she feels overwhelmed and unprepared, but she manages to find an empty hallway to make the phone call. Various relatives speak over each other with a cascade of questions, increasing her feelings of helplessness and anxiety. At the end of the call, she feels like she's disappointed them and failed at her job. In the future, how can Alexandra feel more prepared for this conversation and able to deal with its aftermath?

There is no ideal way to share the heartbreaking news of the death of a loved one, however there are some strategies that can help manage the encounter and the accompanying stress. First, think about your role and relationship to the person who died. It's obviously different if you've developed a trusting long-standing relationship with family members and have helped their loved one through the final stages of their illness, if not think about whether you're the best person to convey this news. If there's someone who is closer or has a trusting relationship, think of asking if they would be willing to have this conversation.

Prepare yourself with medical information regarding what happened that led to the death in anticipation of the family's questions. As best you can, try to understand the course of the illness and who this person was. If it's an option, speaking with other health care workers who may be able to provide insight into the person and family might provide additional help and support.

Take some time to find a quiet, comfortable space. Consider trying or using relaxation techniques that have been personally helpful to ensure you're in a calm frame of mind before starting the conversation. It's important to allot enough time to allow family members to express their grief, ask questions, and to not feel rushed as they take in the news. Taking the extra time to self-regulate before you begin can help you make it through what could be a long and difficult conversation.

Being prepared in both practical and emotional ways will not only help facilitate the healing process for family members, but it will also help you manage your own mental health and wellness in these stressful encounters. Family members reactions including denial, blame, and guilt are common; frequently the notifier is the target of these feelings, although they are almost certainly not specific to you. Working to place these strong emotions in context can help lessen feelings of blame and responsibility for distress.

Take time to process these encounters with colleagues or trusted others who may also be struggling. If feelings of failure or self-blame become intense, consider talking to a mental health professional. Recognize that you have a major responsibility at a time of enormous loss to help the family confront the reality of it and how you handle it will be a part of their personal and family experience as they go forward with processing the death.

You may find additional resources on our Well@Work website. Check out the links in the video description for self-screeners, resources, and links to the rest of the podcasts including episodes on how to utilize an EAP and secondary traumatic stress. Until next time, stay Well@Work. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.