

Guidance for Staff on Talking to Newly Bereaved Families

Supporting and communicating with families when a loved one has just died can feel daunting. It is not unusual to feel strong emotions ourselves. Communicating with compassion, honesty and dignity requires exactly the same skills of empathy and kindness that we use as health professionals every day.

Due to the nature of COVID 19 and the unprecedented pressures of this pandemic, it is likely that this important role will feel more intense and emotionally challenging. It is essential to look after yourself and seek support (see additional information below). Guidance on what to do is readily accessible on the NES website. This brief guide is intended to reassure you that as an experienced health professional, you already have the skills to respond helpfully to those who have just been bereaved and to help you feel more confident about this.

<https://learn.nes.nhs.scot/28674/coronavirus-covid-19/death-and-bereavement>

'Death & Bereavement section on TURAS which includes up to date COVID specific information on death confirmation, certification and registration, and brief videos on communicating with families.'

Talking with Families Just After a Relative Has Died

- Try to ensure you have a quiet space and will not be interrupted. Give yourself time to think about what you are going to say. Speak slowly. Introduce yourself and explain your involvement with the patient. If over the phone, check you are talking to the right person and if they are in a suitable place to talk.
- Acknowledge the person's loss and offer sympathy. It's ok to tell them you are finding it hard to know what to say.

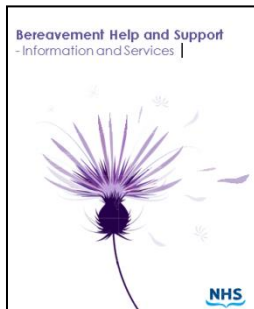
"He became very unwell this morning and sadly died, I'm so sorry."

"Would it be helpful to talk more about this just now?"

"I appreciate this must be very difficult to take in. Is there anything you would like to ask or do not understand?"

- Let the person lead at their own pace, mirror their words and phrases and allow silence, even though this can be more difficult when over the phone.
- Use clear language. Words like "dead" or "died" are more helpful than euphemisms like "passed away" or "moved on". Listen to families' worries and fears. It is helpful to explain what is written on the death certificate. Answer questions and check for understanding.
- Don't press people to open up or make assumptions about what they feel. Avoid saying you know how someone feels or referring to your own thoughts or beliefs.

- There is no “right” way to feel. People may experience a combination of powerful emotions, including shock, pain, anger and guilt.
- They may feel especially isolated with current social distancing restrictions. Ask if there are other family members they are in contact with and encourage them to make contact where possible. The bereavement leaflet for families includes contact details of organisations which offer support.



Grief and Bereavement

- Grief is a normal part of what it is to be human. When a loved one has just died, families are at the very beginning of their unique bereavement journey which will probably last for many months. Honest, compassionate communication at this stage, along with the information in a bereavement leaflet, will help them on their way, but for them, this is just the start.
- Individuals can sometimes express high levels of emotion. A newly bereaved relative may express the belief that life is no longer worth living. Talk of self-harm or suicide should be taken seriously and appropriate advice be sought if necessary.
- If the person who has died was a parent with dependent children, check that their death is being communicated with them in an honest, age appropriate way they can understand. See www.winstonswish.org or www.childbereavementuk.org

Self-care and Support

- Think about your own needs. Notice how you are feeling. It is normal to have strong emotions yourself and feel drained. Notice if you tend to be self-critical or you are reminded of losses you have experienced yourself. Take a break to process intense feelings and seek support, especially from colleagues.
- **NHS Grampian COVID confidential staff support phone line is available 7 days a week, 8.30-10pm. Email gram-uhb.support.acute@nhs.net and a psychologist from NHSG acute sector will call back.**

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou