



Restorative
Community Concepts
Pte Ltd

When Crisis Happens: First Contact, Breaking Bad News, & What Comes Next

Workshop

Vietnam Child Wellbeing &
Safeguarding Summit
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Presented by:

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Dr. Anderson is a Registered Social Worker and psychotherapist in clinical practice at Restorative Community Concepts/Counselling (RCC) in Singapore. She is certified by the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) (USA) as a trainer and crisis responder focusing on the emotional aftermath of trauma. Over the past 20 years, Suzanne has trained crisis responders in the United States, Canada, Yugoslavia, Singapore, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, China, Nepal and Myanmar. She has responded to a variety of critical incidents, including an industrial plant explosion, hurricane, tornado, earthquake, cyclone, tidal surge, tsunami, terrorist attack, drowning, school-based crisis, as well as working with war refugees. Suzanne has worked with many international schools after suicides and student crisis incidents, as well as assisting with the crisis response aspects of child protection issues that became known by the larger school community, including working with the Jakarta Intercultural School in 2014-15. Dr. Anderson has a BS in Criminal Justice Administration/ Psychology Minor from the USA, an MSS (Social Work) from NUS, and a Doctorate of Professional Studies (a multi-disciplinary study of human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region) through the University of Southern Queensland.

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Workshop



When Crisis Happens: First Contact, Breaking Bad News & What Comes Next

Participants will first consider when and under what circumstances bad news needs to be delivered, particularly in the age of technology. Participants will learn how to break bad news to adults in person, over the phone (if there is no way to make the notification in person), in a group, and in writing. This will include the variations of breaking bad news to children and adolescents. Different scenarios will be used to assess who needs to be notified and how they will be notified. Finally, participants will be guided through what support is required (and what isn't advised) immediately following a bad news notification.

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When Crisis Happens:

First Contact, Breaking Bad News, & What Comes Next



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What is Bad News?




“Anything that changes a persons view of the future, in a negative way.”



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Responsibility of Notification



“The way someone is notified [of death] will have a long-term affect on their emotional [coping and] recovery.”

--Dempsy, C. (2008) VA Tech Shootings

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Barriers to Breaking Bad News



- History
- Fears
- Lack of training



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Goals & Values

Goal:

To fully inform in a manner that assists with comprehension so that decisions can be made and actions taken.

Value:



- Provide information
- Offer support and compassion
- Help handle reactions



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Ideal Context of Notification

- Setting & timing of notice are important
- Crisis setting works against the ideal



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When do you break bad news?



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First Contact




- Informal notification
- As soon as possible
- Prevents learning about incidents through media channels
- Establishes a positive relationship of support with NOK
- May be the only notification families receive
- Notify about crisis incident and the potential of student/staff to be involved

Source: Aviem, 2016.

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Schools – Who needs to be notified?

- Faculty/Staff
- Parents
- Students in classes – close friends individually or in social groups
- School board members
- Substitute teachers, and sessional or contract staff (e.g. bus drivers, canteen staff, sports coaches)
- Follow up with individuals absent when notification is made

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Setting of School Notifications

- Not recommended at school assemblies or large gatherings of students
- Not through social media.
- In small groups of students in natural settings such classes, hostels, and clubs
- Those making announcements should be provided a script
- Those making announcements should have support

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Content of School Group Notification



- Acknowledging the need to share sad news
- Provide the news as simply as possible
- Identify any individuals who are unaccounted for or indicate that all are accounted for
- School is committed to providing help
- Address the danger of rumors & announcing on social media
- Ways of coping
- Ways that help is available

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Notification Guidelines




- In Pairs
- In Person
- In Time
- In Plain Language
- With Compassion



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Notification Preparation




- **Confirm**
 - Identity of deceased, injured or missing
 - Circumstances of incident
- **Determine**
 - Who will notify
 - Who to notify
- **Warning: physical shock**


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Notification: In Pairs



- Always in pairs
- Plan who will do what




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Notification: In Person

- Make every effort to notify in person



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Notification: In Time With Certainty


- As soon as possible
- With positive identification

ASAP

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Notification: In Plain Language



- Identify yourself
- Identify the person to notify
- Sitting down
- Plain language
 - “I have some difficult news to tell you...”

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Notification: With Compassion




<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presence• Take time• Accept reactions• Offer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Caution:▪ Don't take victim's personal items▪ Don't impose your beliefs
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Phone Notification

- Only if impossible to do in person
- Arrange for someone to be with the survivor before or after the notification



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Following notifications

- PAUSE
- Find out what the person needs
- Ask who can come and be with the person who has just received the information – don't leave them alone
- Provide counselling/crisis intervention support (if appropriate)
- Provide counselling referrals
- It's advisable that people don't drive after receiving a notification

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Following notifications - schools




- Identify who may be high risk
- Others who students are worked about
- Observe students in common areas of the school
- Student absences
- Were close friends of the deceased student

- Had a negative interaction with the deceased student
- Appear to be in a severe state of distress
- Witnessed the death
- Prior trauma and loss
- Existing mental health concerns
- LGBTQ+

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Facilitating Class Discussion




- Some students may want to talk, some may not.
- Paraphrase what students say
- Don't add your own interpretation
- Move away from details
- Validate their reactions
- Identify sources of support

- *"S/he was my friend."*
- *"Why did it have to happen?"*
- *"I'm really mad that it happened."*
- *"We knew he was upset; we should have done something."*
- *"Things like this don't make sense."*
- *"I can't believe it."*

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Exercise



Breaking Bad News in the classroom script

1. What core messages are included in the script?
2. What part of this will be the hardest to read?
3. What part of the script would you want to change and how?

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Thank You!

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References



American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and Suicide Prevention Resource Centre. (2018). [*After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools, Second Edition*](#). Newton, MA: Education Development Centre, Inc.

headspace, National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd. (2015). [*Responding to Suicide in Secondary Schools: a Delphi Study*](#).

Breaking Bad News

The principles described here are simple—Notification should be done:

“In person, in time, in pairs whenever possible, in plain language, and with compassion.”

Goal

To fully inform in a manner that assists with comprehension so that decisions can be made & actions taken.

First Contact

1. As soon as possible
2. Informal notification (not from medical examiner, hospital or police)
3. Prevents learning about incidents through media channels
4. Establishes a positive relationship of support with family and friends of those affected
5. May be the only notification families receive, if remains are not identified
6. Notify about crisis incident and the potential of student/staff to be involved (regardless of how little information is available)

Source: Aviem, 2016.

Notifications

Preparation

Before the notification, move quickly to gather information.

1. Confirm the identity of the deceased or injured person
2. Gather details about the circumstances surrounding the death or injury,
3. Determine which personnel will take part in the notification, and determine if there are personnel who should not take part in the notification, and
4. Determine if other persons are likely to be present at the notification.

Precautionary Note: Physical Shock

Persons learning of the death of a loved one may experience symptoms of shock such as tremors and a sudden decrease in blood pressure. *Shock is a medical emergency—help should be summoned.*

“In Pairs”

1. Aim to have two (2) people present to make the notification.
2. Plan the notification procedure before you arrive, one person should take the lead.

“In Person”

1. Always make death or life threatening injury notification in person not by telephone.
2. Arrange notification in person even if the survivors live far away—law enforcement from the survivor’s location may assist.

“In Time” and With Certainty

1. Provide notification as soon as possible—but be absolutely sure that there is positive identification of the victim and survivor.
2. Provide “missing” notification with information regarding on-going rescue and information on how next of kin can assist with identification.

“In Plain Language”

1. You should clearly identify yourselves, present any credentials that you may have and ask to talk with the family in private.
2. Do not make the notification at the doorstep. Be sure you are speaking to the right person. Ask to move inside, and get the survivors seated in the privacy of their home.
3. Use straightforward and direct language in explaining the reason for the visit.
 - Begin by saying, “I have some difficult (or bad) news to tell you,” or a similar statement.
 - Avoid vague expressions such as “Sally was lost” or “passed away.”
 - Call the deceased or injured employee by name—rather than “the body” or “he”.
 - Patiently answer any questions about the cause of death, the location of the deceased person, etc.
 - There are few consoling words that survivors find helpful—but it is always appropriate to say, “I am sorry this happened.”

“With Compassion”

1. Your presence and compassion are the most important resources you bring to death notification.
2. Plan to take time to provide information, support, and direction. Never simply notify and leave.
3. Accept the survivor’s emotions and your own.
4. Offer support and assistance to the survivors:
 - Offer to call a friend or family member who will come to support the survivors and stay until the support person arrives.

- Offer to help contact others who must be notified (until a support person arrives to help with this duty.)

Cautions

- Be careful not to impose your own religious beliefs.
- Many survivors have reported later that statements like these were not helpful to them: “It was God’s will,” “They led a full life,” and “I understand what you are going through”.
- Do not take a victim’s personal items with you at the time of notification.

Other Forms of Notification

Guidelines for Phone Notification

1. Arrange for someone to be with the survivors if possible prior to notification
2. Introduce & identify yourself
3. Confirm the identity of the person called
4. Encourage the survivor to sit down while you talk
5. If possible, have a partner work with you should an emergency arise during the notification
6. Following notification, make contacts for the survivors as needed
7. Help them plan the next twenty-four hours, if needed

Guidelines for Group Notification at School

1. Not recommended that notifications be given at school assemblies or large gatherings of students or through social media.
2. Notifications should be made to small groups of students in natural settings such as “home base” class by the class teacher.
3. Teachers should be relieved of making the announcement if they are uncomfortable. A CMT member can make the notification in the teacher’s place.
4. Those making announcements to students should be given a script to guide the information they share with the students.

Guidelines for Group Notification of Large Groups

1. May be done in the setting of a family assistance center where families and friends may gather to await news of their loved one.
2. Multiple helpers
3. Simultaneous notification
4. Individual & group notification
5. After notification provide separate rooms

6. If simultaneous notification is not possible, provide individual & group notification—provide information about rescue efforts
7. Inform those waiting of anything they can do to help with identification
8. Be prepared with medical care & crisis interveners

Guidelines for Viewing the Body

1. Give choice
2. Preparing survivors for distortions/mutilations
3. Be non-judgmental
4. Provide escorts & drivers
5. Advocate, if necessary

Sources: NOVA, 2009; AVIEM, 2016; Headspace, 2015.

Sample Death Notification Statement for Students

Share this death notification statement with students in small groups, such as homerooms or advisories, **not** in assemblies or over loudspeakers. These statements are examples that can be modified by the principal or Crisis Response Team as needed.

Option 1 – When the Death Has Been Ruled a Suicide

I am so sorry to tell you all that one of our students, **[NAME]**, has died. I'm also very sad to tell you that the cause of death was suicide.

Many of you may also feel very sad. Others may feel other emotions such as anger or confusion. It's okay to feel whatever emotions you might be feeling. When someone takes their own life, it leads to a lot of questions, some of which may never be completely answered.

While we may never know why **[NAME]** ended their life, we do know that suicide has many causes. In many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're not feeling well in any way to reach out for help. Suicide should not be an option.

Rumors may come out about what happened, but please don't spread them. They may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. I'm going to do my best to give you the most accurate information as soon as I know it.

Each of us will react to **[NAME]**'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Some of us may have known **[NAME]** well, and some of us may not. But either way, we may have strong feelings. You might find it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork for a little while. On the other hand, you might find that focusing on school helps take your mind off what has happened. Either is okay.

I want you to know that your teachers and I are here for you. We also have counselors here to help us all cope with what happened. If you'd like to talk to one of them, just let me or one of your teachers know or look for the counselors in **[NOTE SPECIFIC LOCATION]** between classes or during lunch.

We are all here for you. We are all in this together, and the school staff will do whatever we can to help you get through this.

Option 2 – When the Cause of Death Is Unconfirmed

I am so sorry to tell you all that one of our students, **[NAME]**, has died. The cause of death has not yet been determined.

We are aware that there has been some talk that this might have been a suicide death. Rumors may begin to come out, but please don't spread them. They may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. I'm going to do my best to give you the most accurate information as soon as I know it.

Since the subject has been raised, I do want to take this chance to remind you that suicide, when it does occur, is very complicated. No one single thing causes it. But in many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're not feeling well in any way to reach out for help. Suicide should not be an option.

Each of us will react to **[NAME]**'s death in our own way, and we need to be respectful of each other. Right now, I'm feeling very sad, and many of you may feel sad too. Others may feel anger or confusion. It's okay to feel whatever emotions you might be feeling. Some of us may have known **[NAME]** well, and some of us may not. But either way, we may have strong feelings. You might find it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork for a little while. On the other hand, you might find that focusing on school helps take your mind off what has happened. Either is okay.

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Option 3 – When the Family Has Requested the Cause of Death Not Be Disclosed

I am so sorry to tell you all that one of our students, **[NAME]**, has died. The family has requested that information about the cause of death not be shared at this time.

We are aware that there has been some talk that this might have been a suicide death. Rumors may begin to come out, but please don't spread them. They may turn out to be untrue and can be deeply hurtful and unfair to **[NAME]** and their family and friends. I'm going to do my best to give you the most accurate information as soon as I know it.

Since the subject has been raised, I do want to take this chance to remind you that suicide, when it does occur, is very complicated. No one single thing causes it. But in many cases, a mental health condition is part of it, and these conditions are treatable. It's really important if you're not feeling well in any way to reach out for help. Suicide should not be an option.

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Training Notes

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