

- **Opinions** – Do not offer opinions, they may want to form their own
- **Informed Decision** – Do not make decisions that are not yours to make. Give them information to enable them to decide.
- **Support Services** – Victim Services and other Community services to assist victims of tragic circumstances. Does not always fall to you be all things to all people
- **The Suspect** – Give as much information as possible but advise them that investigative and legal proceedings may be in hands of another agency and outside your influence.
- **The Investigation** - Know how much information you can share, who is in charge and how to quickly contact them.

Check

Double Check

Sometimes things change while you are gathering information: a body will be moved from the death scene to the morgue or someone may have been apprehended who may have caused the death. Be sure to double check all original information for accuracy and relevance.

Check to ensure that the scene of the notification is safe for the notification team, support personnel, and next of kin. Conduct a threat assessment of the address of the notification site. (This can be done with the assistance of local police)

In relation to next of kin, it is always advisable to try and get them into a secure location such as a house, private room, or office. If you are at the death scene, and family members arrive try to get them into a vehicle so that they are protected from any danger. Also this helps keep them safe if they experience an extreme grief reaction. **Do not leave them alone.**

Address

Ensure that you have the correct address of the person to be notified. There have been occasions when the police or military officers have attended at an incorrect address and just their presence at a late hour caused extreme distress to the family living there. It is not out of the realm of possibility that people, who may suffer from medical conditions, could have a life threatening reaction upon seeing unknown people at their door in the middle of the night.

Personal Safety

If you are taking someone other than a fellow worker with you to do the notification (faith support, family member, neighbour, or friend), ensure that they are willing to assist you. The death notification situation is one in which personal safety should be in the forefront. Taking someone with you, not knowing if they know what to do, can lead to disaster if there is a violent reaction from the next of kin upon hearing the message.

Volatile Situation

What may happen is that the person assisting you becomes part of the problem and not part of the solution and you are left to deal with the next of kin and the person who was supposed to be helping you. Now you are alone and extremely vulnerable in a potentially volatile situation.

You need to be sure that the person who wants to assist is capable and going to be a benefit rather than a problem. If in doubt about the person who has volunteered to assist you, politely decline the offer and try and find someone who has training or at least an understanding of the process. Once you are inside and the situation turns violent, it is too late and could result in serious injury to you or others on the scene.

Rehearse

Say it Out Loud

Rehearsing the notification may assist you in maintaining your own composure throughout the notification process.

If you say the words to yourself out loud, you will hear them differently than just thinking them. To hear yourself say them will make it easier for you to say them again when the time comes to do the actual notification.

Prepare

It is very important and helpful to prepare yourself by using the actual words of **death, dead, died,** and/or **killed**. They may not be easy to use but they leave little doubt and reduce the chance of misunderstanding or denial.

People have said that they did not want to hear that their loved one was dead, but they also said that they needed to hear that they were dead in order to come to terms with the loss and prepare for what had to be done next.

Trying to use words that soften the blow or are not specific only serves to prolong the pain of the notification situation. Stay away from using terms like *“passed on”*, *“gone”*, *“fatally injured”*, *“was lost”*, or *“didn’t make it.”*

Showing Emotion

Showing your own sadness or emotion during the notification process indicates that you are human and are affected by the sadness too. It is not wrong to be saddened by the pain that the next of kin are experiencing, however you must maintain a calm, reassuring authority about you.

Many recipients of notifications have shared the fact that, in their particular case, the people doing the notification were not afraid to let them know that they were also saddened by the

family's loss. The people were not "*just doing a job*", they truly cared about the family members as human beings.

Your words and behaviour work together demonstrating the compassion that must be present when delivering this very difficult message.

Notify

Two Notifiers

Have two people present to make a notification. The ideal team is composed of a trained notifier (most often a police officer) who is familiar with the facts, and a support person(s) (Victim Services volunteers). The police officer should do the actual notification and be prepared to take the lead in communicating with the next of kin.

Consider the benefit of having a gender balanced notification team. It may also be very helpful to have at least one of the team members experienced in dealing with shock and trained in CPR and medical emergencies.

It is best if you can draw upon trained notifiers from all cultural and ethnic groups.

Go Together

Go together, not one at a time. One family was devastated when a police officer appeared to tell them that a more senior officer would be there soon to bring them some bad news.

If a large group is to be notified, several notifiers may be needed. If there are multiple victims, plan for all families to be notified at approximately the same time.

Park on the Street

It is a good idea to park on the street away from where the notification will take place. If possible, walk to the house where the notification will take place. The time taken to walk can be spent mentally preparing for how you are going to handle the notification.

Walking also allows the recipient of the notification the opportunity to prepare for the bad news when they see you walking towards their door.

Be aware that some next of kin may show abusive behaviour while being notified.

Leaving your vehicle on the street and not in the driveway will enable you to leave the premises without having to ask others to move their vehicles which may be parked behind yours blocking your path.

Introduce Yourself

Introduce yourself at the door and ask to be admitted to the home. Respect their right to privacy and wait until you are in the house to tell them why you are there.

Preface your notification with “*I have some very bad / tragic news*”. This starts the thought process and may soften the impact of the death notification. Be very straightforward and direct with the notification. Use common vocabulary to describe the circumstances. Be specific with your words like you practiced.

Avoid Acronyms

Stay away from using job specific language such as acronyms, or codes.

Using terms like “10-50 PI”. “10-45”. “15:30 hours” “DOA”, “MVC”, “VCARS” or any other organizational short forms, acronyms or jargon will only be confusing and add to an already stressful situation.

It is better to use everyday language and tell them what happened using the actual definitions in their full form like a “very serious motor vehicle collision”, “that happened at 3:30 this afternoon”, “we have support people from Victim Services to help you”, etc.

Do not overload them with information and keep it as simple and straightforward as possible.

Children and Youth

Children and youth are often present during the notification process. Adult caregivers should be given the choice regarding their child’s inclusion or exclusion.

Even when a child has witnessed a violent death, a notification is necessary since death is not readily comprehended. If you are delivering a death notification to children, you should take them to a safe place to do so. If a trusted adult is available to be there, encourage participation.

A safe place is one that is comfortable, secure, and removed from other major activity. While it may be within their own home, it should not be in their bedroom or kitchen because they may associate the death and their accompanying reactions with these places and that association may interfere with sleeping or eating habits in the aftermath.

Keep it Simple and Honest

Provide them, if age-appropriate, with a blanket, toy, or stuffed animal (a favourite item if available) to hold on to while you tell them what happened. If they are crying or agitated, hold or soothe them until they can concentrate on what you have to say.

Sit down with them (on the floor, if appropriate) and tell them you have something sad to talk with them about. Tell them in short, factual statements what happened.

“Your father was killed tonight. He is dead. Someone shot him with a gun. It is very sad and your mother is very sad.”

Answer Questions

If the circumstances of the death are already known, say it “A man robbed him and then shot him.”

Ask them if they have any questions, and listen carefully to their concerns. It is important to try to find out what is happening inside their minds.

If children have witnessed the violent death, encourage them to relate all the details they saw so you can find out what they think happened.

Try to reconcile their perceptions with what you know happened and immediately begin to dispel any distortions or feelings of guilt or self-blame.

Assist

Listen

The most effective assistance can be given in the form of listening. In most cases, the bereaved person needs to talk and be heard. Let them show their emotion without judgment.

Waiting in silence is extremely important. This is probably one of the most difficult things for us to do. If you look at the situations that we deal with on an everyday basis, it is clear to see that in most cases you are the ones who must take charge of the situation, identify the problem quickly, find the best solution to the problem, and then implement a solution that will fix the problem.

There must be an understanding that in the case of death notification, there is no way to fix the problem, but there is a way to empower the bereaved family member(s) and that now becomes your role. Listening is one of the most effective skills that can be used in this situation.

Reassure

Give reassurance that you will do all you can to help them (phone calls, wait with them until others arrive, help them prioritize what needs to be done).

Do not initiate holding or embracing. If they initiate it, however, do not back away. Not all people want to be hugged when they are in an emotional state, particularly by someone they do not know so it is best not to initiate this process. In other cases, family members may express their gratitude for your compassion and care in the death notification process.

Although this may seem strange, it is one of the ways that people work to process their grief. They may reach out to you or try to hug you in an effort to let you know that they appreciate what you have done for them in this very difficult situation.

Depart

Not Alone

It is best to ensure that the bereaved are not left alone after you complete your notification. You may use the services of the Victim Services Crisis Response Team if you have them in your area. They can be very helpful.

Try to locate a relative, friend, neighbour, or faith support person who will stay with the bereaved once you leave.

Able to Cope

Before leaving, make sure that the person is able to cope with the situation. There have been cases when very distraught survivors have taken their own lives after the notification team left the scene. If there is any doubt whatsoever in your mind about how they are coping, do not leave them alone; stay with them. In the event that an individual does take their own life after receiving the tragic news, there will certainly be an impact on you if you had left them alone.

Although it would not be your fault that they took the action they did, there will most certainly be a lot of second guessing, “*if only I would have,*” and even feelings of guilt and responsibility. Once again, when in doubt, stay with them until you get the sense that they are able to deal with the news rationally.

Bonding

When you are ready to depart, leave your business card, including your name, office phone number, and the name and phone number of the local Victim Services Crisis Support Service. In highly emotional death notification situations where you show true compassion and care for the bereaved, there can be bonding that takes place between you and the family. There is a level of trust and respect that develops and in many cases the family will only want to deal with you when making enquiries about the loss of their loved one.

Police officers have shared stories of families that showed their appreciation for the officers by way of thank you cards, annual Christmas cards, and public acknowledgements of thanks in local newspapers. Some of these “relationships” between the family and the officer(s) have gone on for many years.

Leave Information

Leave written information, for example, cards with appropriate support services with addresses, phone numbers, and hours of operation.

In these difficult circumstances, there are times when the next of kin may not remember any of the things that were discussed in the process.

When you are giving them written information, you may wish to suggest that they might not want to spend time reading it all now but to put it in a safe place so that they can refer to it later.

Debrief

Ask Questions

Members of the notification team should meet as soon as possible, after the notification, to debrief the situation.

It is important during this stage of the notification process to confirm who is responsible for any follow-up tasks that will help to the ease pain and suffering of the survivor(s).

Review the notification by asking the following questions:

- What went wrong?
- What went right?
- How could it be done better in the future?
- What follow-up may be needed from the Department or Victim Services?

Discuss Feelings

Death notifications are, without a doubt, stressful and difficult and sometimes very depressing. Be honest. Share your concerns with someone you trust and respect.

Discuss any personal feelings that may have been triggered during the notification process. Support one another and respect confidentiality.

If you feel it necessary, do not hesitate to speak with someone in the Department's Employee Assistance Program or Peer Support Group

Be Aware and Prepared

During the debrief process, you need to be aware and prepared for:

- A change in demeanour. Be aware of your body language and tone of voice and not just the words you use. You need to ensure that you do not come across as "*just doing a job*".
- A change in personal characteristics e.g. was outgoing, now introverted or often used humour, now rarely laughs.
- Expressions of appreciation from the family. When a family thanks you for the way in which you dealt with them in this tragic time, it is sometimes difficult to accept positive feedback from the family and the tendency might be to minimize it by saying things like "*It's no big deal*" or "*It's just part our job*". Understand that for the family, it is a big deal and

it may be part of their process to let you know how much they appreciate your kindness. Accept their gratitude with grace and humility and let them know that you appreciate their thanks.

Summary

The fundamental elements of a death notification are:

- Research
- Check
- Rehearse
- Notify
- Assist
- Depart
- Debrief

Have on hand as much information as possible to help answer any questions and concerns of the next of kin. Double check and rehearse all information you receive before notifying the next of kin. Notify simply and directly with warmth and compassion. Assist the bereaved with any questions they may have. Before departing, make sure they can cope and leave written materials in case they have further questions. After the notification, meet and debrief the situation as soon as possible with your colleagues.

Next of Kin

Next of kin may communicate the need to have the opportunity to express their emotions. As difficult as it may be for you to see the emotional state of the next of kin, it is extremely important that you allow them this opportunity. Be patient with them and give them the time to get their feelings out.

There is no way you will be able to rationalize with someone who is in a highly emotional condition. They need time to ventilate before you can even begin to give them relevant information about the death. Take your time.

Survivor Needs During Death Notification

Validate and Accept

The next of kin need to have all their feelings accepted and validated. For a parent to be angry because a child has died is a very natural reaction and they have every right to feel anger. They need to know that their feelings are not “wrong”.

Emotional Reactions

Next of kin may experience any or all of the following:

Unreality	Emotional Outbursts	Dependency
Shock	Insomnia	Melancholy
Intense Physical Reaction	Stigma	Medication / Alcohol Use
Denial	Regret	Confusion
Questioning	Self-Blame	Remorse
Bargaining	Guilt	Regression
High Anxiety	Fear	Sadness
Isolation	Rage	Anguish
Disbelief	Helplessness	Despair
Withdrawal	Anger	Depression
Numbness	Phobias	Agitation
Distortion	Retribution	Lost Trust

Listen

*When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving advice,
you have not done what I asked.*

*When I ask you to listen to me
and you begin to tell me why
I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.*

*When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to do something
to solve my problems,
you have failed me.*

Strange as it may seem...

So, please, just listen and hear me.

*And if you want to talk, wait a few minutes
for your turn and I promise
I'll listen to you..*

Inform

It is very important to keep survivors informed of any ongoing processes. Information is power, and what the survivors need is the power to regain control of their lives. This will also help prevent any surprises in the future.

Recognize that powerlessness is overcome with information and choices. You can give survivors the information, and they will make the choices.

“One of the first lessons to learn is not to fix, but to provide opportunities for healing.”
Paul Alexander, Therapist

Assist

Understand the significance of concrete material assistance. Never minimize the importance of the little things such as driving them to hospital, making them a pot of coffee or tea, making notes for them to keep, or helping them make phone calls to other family members.

During death notification, survivors need an opportunity to express their emotions. They will welcome a calm, reassuring authority, and a way to restore control in their lives. Empathize with the next of kin; consider how you would want to be treated in the same situation.

Keep it simple when notifying next of kin. Use plain language in basic, understandable terms, and avoid information overload. Give them the basic information, and then answer any questions. It is important to provide an opportunity for them to ask questions.

The Truth

Tell the truth. You should not be graphically descriptive, but be carefully and benevolently honest. When asking questions, remember that the way you ask the question is just as important as the question itself.

Deal patiently with denial, and do not abandon the survivors. Ensure that they are not left alone after the notification.

Consider the surroundings, and ensure a safe place, physically and emotionally, for all concerned. Respond to immediate needs and remember: safety first.

Feeling Safe

The next of kin need to know that someone is being held accountable, where applicable. They have a desire to receive acknowledgement that what happened was unfair and undeserved.

Next of kin often feel the need to seek safety for themselves and other family members. Survivors have reported that after the death of their loved one, they did not feel safe in their own home.

Although you may rationally believe that they are truly in no danger at all, it is not your perception of their safety that matters to them. Their perception is their reality and, therefore, steps should be taken to ensure that they are allowed to go to or be taken to a place where they will feel safe. This may include the home of a friend, neighbour, or relative.

The manner in which you deal with this will have a great impact upon them and let them know that you are concerned with their well being.

Financial Matters

In cases where the deceased was the only source of family income, the reaction to the news of the death may be doubly difficult and there may be a need to seek information about their future

financial security. This will be a situation where the Victim Services may be able to work with the family to connect them with other community social services organizations that may provide assistance.

Funeral costs and potential future financial burdens can leave survivors feeling extremely vulnerable and afraid. Local funeral directors have contacts with many agencies and can work with families to get them through the extremely difficult experience of a sudden death in the family.

Cultural Customs

Be aware of different cultural customs regarding grief and bereavement. Many communities and organizations are very diverse in their cultural composition. Take the time to learn about the cultures and people who live in your community and find out about their customs surrounding the death experience. Local multicultural organizations and funeral directors can be very good sources of information regarding different death and dying practices and customs of the diverse cultures within your community.

What NOT to Say

The Art of Communication

The art of communication is sometimes imperfect. There are situations in which you have spoken before you really thought about the impact that your words would have on the recipient. In these situations, you then find yourself apologizing and trying to make things right, sometimes without success.

Once a word is spoken it can never be unspoken. It will be out there and remembered for any pain which it might have caused, even if it was said with the best of intentions. In an effort to try and make the bereaved feel better, you often say things that you think will help. But in reality, the things you say are often more about your own discomfort about their reaction and are a mistaken attempt to fix the situation for them.

“I know how you feel.”

This is nothing more than an assumption on your part. How could you know how they feel? You have no idea of their entire background, history, or relationship with the deceased.

What you might know for sure is how you felt in a similar circumstance but that is all. For example, if you suffered the loss of a father who was very loving and kind to you all of your life you may have undergone great feelings of sadness and pain. A person who did not have such a good relationship with their father, perhaps because of abuse issues, may on the surface seem saddened but inwardly feel great relief at the death. How could you know this? The answer is you cannot and so it would serve you very well to avoid saying “*I know how you feel*” or “*I know what you are going through*”. You may get a very angry response like “*Oh do you...well then tell*

me how DO I feel?" and then the struggle begins to take back what was said and it cannot be done easily.

“Time heals all wounds.”

These words offer the bereaved an unrealistic solution to their immediate pain. The purpose of saying these words is to make them feel that there is hope in sight that the pain of the loss will go away by itself, and all they really have to do is wait and all will be back to normal.

If someone suffered a severe physical injury such as a severed limb, you would not offer these words as a remedy for the injury. It is absurd to think that if you sever a limb from your body all you really need to do is “*wait a while and all will work out fine*”. It is not time that helps you heal, it is the treatment and support you receive throughout the medical process. The same is true for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one.

“You’ll get over this.”

How do you know they will? Does a woman ever forget the stillborn child she gave birth to? Does a family ever get over the death of a child who died as result of childhood leukemia?

The truth of the matter is that people never truly “*get over*” a death of someone close to them, many of them however, do come to terms with the loss to the point that they can once again function in everyday life. These words may leave the impression that one day the person who died will no longer be important to the bereaved.

“Go on with your life.”

This is telling the bereaved that they “should” do what you think is best for them. It is better to offer support, listen to them, and empower them to take on their own process.

We live in a society that focuses, to a great degree, on the family unit and couples. For those who live the single life, whether widowed or divorced, there seems to be an unspoken belief that unless you have someone in your life, you cannot function properly. Newly bereaved people are going on with their lives. They may not be doing it the way you think is right, but they are doing it nonetheless.

“Focus on your memories.”

Once again this makes a very big assumption that the memories they may have are all happy and pleasant. This is not always the case. You really cannot be sure what goes on behind closed doors in your community. There are families that have been ravaged by sexual, physical, and verbal abuse that no one outside the home ever knew existed. When the abuser dies, there may be a sense of freedom and relief.

Example

A woman was notified that her husband had been killed. The notification was done very compassionately but the response from the wife was “I’m glad he is dead”.

This surprised the notification team and she went on to explain that for many years her husband had physically abused her and their children. When asked why she had never contacted the police she told the notifier that her husband had threatened to kill them all if she ever called the police. She believed he was capable of such a thing, but now she finally felt safe and free from him.

In this case for you to tell her to “focus on her memories” would certainly be the worst thing you could say

“He/she didn’t know what hit him/her.”

The usual intent of this is to give the next of kin the impression that their loved one did not suffer. The downside of this expression is that the family may find out later that, in fact, the deceased really did know what hit him, and now they are left to wonder about the three things discussed previously: Did they suffer? Were they afraid? Were they alone when they died?

It is very hard to know if someone did or did not suffer. It is easier to know if someone died quickly, alone, and in fear. If you concentrate on these three issues, you can provide more useful information to family members. If you know through investigation that the person died immediately you can say just that and let the family make their own decision as to whether there was any suffering.

If the person did not die immediately but lingered for 20 or 30 minutes before dying, you could tell the family what you know to be true that might help them with the three issues. It may be that the deceased was in a severe crash and was still conscious and pinned in the wreckage for some time.

In most cases, paramedics or other emergency services personnel on scene would minister to the injured and dying and in doing so would comfort them and be with them at the time of death. This is important information that could be given to family members.

“It must have been his/her time.”

This statement can lead to all sorts of difficulty because it carries with it an assumption that somewhere there is a big clock, calendar, or checklist with everyone’s name on it.

This raises the question “*who made up the list and why was my loved one’s time so short?*” There really is no sense to this statement when you break it down; it just leads to many questions that have no answers and this complicates the process for families.

Avoid Religious References

Unless your specific role at the scene is to minister to the spiritual needs of the family, it is wise not to start preaching the gospel according to your beliefs. Not everyone shares the same religious beliefs. In fact, in many cases family members have found that, because of the heinous nature of their loved one's death, they may lose their faith.

To say to someone that *"God works in very mysterious ways and we are not meant to know the reasons for His actions"* can lead to a very angry response from the next of kin. Responses such as *"Don't you dare talk to me about God. A kind compassionate God would never allow my child to be taken from us in such a brutal and hideous way...there is no God, and I will thank you to keep your religion to yourself."*

The best that you can do, if you feel that the family may have an affiliation with a specific church or religion, is to ask them if they want you to contact anyone to give them spiritual support.

What TO Say

"I am so sorry."

This statement is very benign in nature and it does not tell them what to do, offer a religious belief, or make any assumptions. It just says clearly that you as a human being are sorry for their loss.

When saying this it must come from the heart rather than the head. If you are not comfortable using this phrase, then by all means use one that is more suitable to you. Remember that whatever you decide to say, you must think about it and ensure that it is a sincere and caring statement that does not carry with it any chance for misunderstanding.

In this situation, less is sometimes more; you truly do not have to say a lot. The best approach is to spend most of your time listening and offering to answer any questions that the family may have. Be compassionate, honest, and careful in your choice of words. Never be brutally honest; always compassionately honest.

What NOT to Do

Do Not Encourage to Take Medicine

To see them in a highly emotional state and suggest that they take drugs to calm down comes across as very matter of fact and business like. It says to the bereaved *"Okay let's stop the emotional stuff so I can get my job done and get out of here"*. Avoid making suggestions to the next of kin on this matter altogether. Remain compassionate throughout.

Do Not Prematurely Refer to Support Groups

Many support groups are most helpful in the days and weeks that follow the death rather than at the scene during the notification.

During the immediate process of the notification, there is the likelihood that the bereaved may have enough on their plate just dealing with the news.

In many cases, survivors have shared that the support groups were of most help after the funeral when the family was alone and having to face life without their loved one.

Do Not Make Promises

If you make a promise, whatever it may be, you must be capable of keeping it.

A relationship develops between the family and you during the process of death notification. Like it or not, it is real and they will trust you and respect you. So making a promise that cannot or will not be kept erodes that trust in you.

It is very easy to become so involved in the situation that you may say to the family:

“I promise you we will get the person responsible for this”

This is a promise that you may not be able to keep. There are times when people wanted for committing crimes are not identified or apprehended. . Some things are not within your scope of influence and therefore impossible for you to do. The family may not let you off the hook because, after all, you did make a promise to them and they trusted you to keep your word.

In these kinds of cases, it is better to say:

I will do what I can to find the person responsible.

It is all about your personal credibility and the credibility of the organization to which you belong. You are the organization in the eyes of that family and the way they perceive that organization in the future will hinge on what you do and say during this very definitive time in their life.

Avoid Misinformation or Untruths

Again this speaks directly to the issue of credibility. Once you tell a lie, even if you think it will make it easier for the family, you have diminished any trust that they may have had in you. Doing the wrong thing for the right reasons is still doing the wrong thing.

There are going to be times when the truth will be very difficult and ugly. You must find the courage to tell the truth in a way that is compassionate and helpful.

Chances are that even if you keep the truth from the family, they will find out in the long run and when they do your integrity will be called into question; *“If he lied about this, what else did he lie about?”*

Do Not “Protect” from Facts

This usually happens when family members ask to see the body of their loved one or want to know the facts surrounding the death. When a loved one is the victim of homicide, suicide, or a violent sudden death, there are sometimes many questions to which the next of kin want answers.

Human remains can be severely disfigured, decomposed, or even dismembered and notification personnel sometimes feel that it is their duty to protect the family from seeing the condition of their loved one's body.

Also there are situations, for example, in which people die, that may not be easy for the family to understand. You may say things like *“You don't need to see her”*, *“I can't allow you to see him that way”*, or *“You really don't need to know that”*. Although you are trying to protect the family from what may be a horrendous sight, it takes control away from the family and leaves them to wonder why they are “not allowed” to know or see.

Summary

Next of kin may express the need to have the opportunity to express their emotions. As difficult as it may be for you, it is extremely important that you allow them this opportunity.

During this time, it is easy to fall back on familiar clichés and trite sayings that on the surface sound supportive but in fact are not. Clichés should be avoided. Instead say “I am sorry.” This statement is very benign in nature and it does not tell them what to do, offer a religious belief, or make any assumptions. It just says clearly that you as a human being are sorry for their loss.

When speaking, less is sometimes more; you truly do not have to say a lot. Spend most of your time listening and offering to answer any questions that the family may have. Be compassionate, honest, and careful in your choice of words.

Viewing the Deceased

Viewing the deceased by the next of kin is never an easy process. In some circumstances when you notify the next of kin you may also have to respond to their wish to see their loved one immediately and it may be up to you to prepare them for what they will go through. The way you handle this situation can have a tremendous impact on the family.

By learning the protocol for viewing the deceased you can address the concerns of the bereaved and avoid many of the factors that could contribute to their traumatization.

Preparation

It is very important to prepare the next of kin and give full information before viewing the deceased. Make sure you know the local allowances, rules, and regulations of institutions.

If you are able, offer alternative locations for the viewing: hospital, morgue, or funeral home; and describe the room where the body will be, and what the body may look like. In doing this, you help them prepare for what they are about to see. There should be no surprises.

Compassion

For a family member to be shown their dead loved one without any information may cause a very traumatic reaction. If you are able to give them some factual information about what they are going to see, before they see it, they may be better prepared for the viewing experience. Remember, honesty is very important but not to the point of being brutally honest. Find a way to be compassionately honest in the manner in which you share this information with the family member(s).

Be wary of opinions. Your opinion may predispose the next of kin to a belief that deprives them of the opportunity to make up their own mind about the death or condition of the body. Be open-minded and listen to what they say.

Viewing

Families often clearly express the desire to see their loved one. However, they may be reluctant to ask for “permission” from authority.

When viewing injuries, families may contemplate how they were inflicted. They may experience cautious relief or a realization that there was pain in death.

A Chance to Say Goodbye

At a coroner’s/medical examiner’s office, next of kin may be asked to identify the body through a television monitor. Be sure to use proper terms and explain things such as colour and odour changes. Be compassionately honest about conditions, mutilations, and distortions. Skin may be pale because blood settles to the lowest point due to gravity.

Even with bodies disfigured by trauma, many next of kin report feeling regret in not seeing because often fantasies may be worse than reality. Viewing gives families a confirmation of death and an opportunity to say good-bye. This affirmation of reality helps with the grieving process.

Example

A young boy died as a result of a traffic collision and subsequent fire resulting from the crash. The boy's body was so badly burned that he was unrecognizable. When the parents of the boy came to the morgue wanting to view their son, the coroner took the time to explain that the boy had died as a result of the crash and the ensuing fire rendered him unrecognizable. If the family chose to view his body, they would not see their son as they knew him prior to his death. The coroner agreed that they did need to have the confirmation of the death and some time to be with the son's body. Although it would be covered with a sheet and they would not see the burned body the coroner offered the opportunity for them to have time with their son and touch the covered body, they agreed to this and were given the opportunity to have this very important part of the grief process. Given the factual information in a compassionate way allowed them to make an informed decision whether to view or not to view their son's body.

After the Viewing

If you are unable to provide transportation home afterward, arrange for a support person to come to the hospital or coroner's office to do so.

Remember, the family may not be disturbed by the equipment and the scene; they are shocked by the death.

Have contacts available for drug, alcohol, mental health problems, faith support, grief counsellors, babysitting, suicide interventionists, and other emergency numbers that the next of kin may want.

"One of the first lessons to learn is not to fix, but to provide opportunities for healing."

Paul Alexander, Therapist

Summary

Viewing gives families a confirmation of death and an opportunity to say good-bye. This affirmation of reality helps with the grieving process. It is your job to help the bereaved with their concerns and answer as many questions as possible.

It is very important to prepare the next of kin and give full information before viewing the deceased. Find a way to be compassionately honest in the manner in which you share this information with the family member(s).

Family members may experience further traumatization following the death of their loved one. By learning the protocol for viewing the deceased, you can address the concerns of the bereaved and avoid many of the factors that could contribute to their traumatization.

Concerns

Concerns of the Bereaved

Families often have many concerns and worries during and immediately following a notification. There is a lot of information that must be absorbed and understood in a very short order during an extremely emotional time. It is a very difficult thing for them to understand the necessary investigations: medical, legal, evidence. It is your job to help the bereaved with their concerns and answer as many questions as possible.

Take the time to listen to their concerns and assure them that you will work to find answers for them.

Autopsy

Next of kin are often very concerned about the location of the body, funeral times, and if there is going to be an autopsy. Explain to them why there may have to be an autopsy and who decides if there is to be one. Also, explain what can be gained from performing an autopsy.

Investigative Questions

Any investigative questions are difficult reality checks. Investigators should always do their best to be empathetic in the way they ask questions or talk to family members. For example, in cases where a family member is found dead in the home and no immediate cause can be found, there needs to be an investigation into the family background and the possibility that the death may have been caused by a family member. But in many cases the person may have died as a result of natural causes or by accident and the family could have done nothing to prevent it.

In this case, the cause of death is usually found some time after the initial questioning has taken place.

If the questioning was harsh and accusatory in nature the family are going to feel victimized by the very people who are supposed to be there to help them through this agonizing experience.

Public Opinions

If the death is “public” resulting in opinions and public commentary or in high profile cases, the family may be faced with other people speaking their minds about the death.

When a family loses a loved one in the line of duty, such as a Canadian government employee serving overseas, police officer, soldier, firefighter, etc., they may have to come to terms with the fact that different groups or factions in the community may view the death differently than the family does.

Media Attention

In the event that the death evokes a lot of public interest and media attention, explain to the family that they do not have to speak to anyone.

It may, however, be more practical to have them appoint a family member who is able to speak on behalf of the family at a press conference alone or with organization representatives. This ensures that the information is correct. It can also make it unnecessary for someone to go to the media later to clear up untruths, misconceptions, or erroneous information.

You should inform the family that your Department's media relations may be able to assist them deal with the media, if required.

Information

Let the family know that you are the source of correct information and that if they want to know anything they can contact you. This again speaks to the issue of trust that has developed between you and the family.

Ideally, media is only spoken to with the family's permission unless the public's "need to know" is paramount. In any case, the family should be given the information before you release it to the media.

Families may feel betrayed to learn new things through the media that they have not been told. Warn them that television coverage will likely be highly dramatic and may be replayed for some time.

Factors Contributing to Traumatization

- Witnessing the actual death of others.
- Experiencing threat of death to self and to others.
- Experiencing threat to the physical integrity of self and to others.
- Experiencing threat of serious injury to self and to others.
- Awareness of an abrupt change of reality.
- Knowledge of type of destructive method used.
- Imposing unwanted religious references.

Helping Victims Heal

You have notified a family of the death of their child in a motor vehicle collision. You have answered all their questions and helped them as much as you can. What now? How can you and your organization help this family to move through the grieving process and begin to heal?

Remember that recovery is rarely, if ever, complete. It is likely that the Next of Kin are never going to forget this encounter with you, and what you do or say will be with them for a lifetime.

If you get it right, they may never forget you – if you get it wrong, they may never forgive you. In some smaller communities, you will encounter these families many times after this event.

It never hurts to just ask: “How are you doing?” – And then let them tell you if they wish.

After all, you are now part of their family history.

Extra Support

Remember, following a death, survivors may have questions or need extra support.

THINGS TO AVOID

- Don't let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out to the bereaved.
- Don't avoid them because you are uncomfortable. Being avoided adds pain to an already intolerably painful experience.
- Don't say, “I know how you feel”.
- Don't tell them what they should feel or do.
- Don't change the subject when they mention their dead loved one.
- Don't say “you ought to be feeling better by now”, or anything else which implies a judgment about their feelings.
- Don't avoid mentioning their loved one's name out of fear of reminding them of their pain. They haven't forgotten it for a moment.
- Don't point out that at least they have another child or children. Children are not interchangeable. They cannot replace each other.
- Don't say that they can always have another child. Even if they could, or wanted to, another child would not replace the child that has died.
- Don't try to find something positive about their loved one's death.

POSITIVE THINGS TO DO

- Let your genuine concern and caring show.
- Be available to listen and to help with whatever seems needed at the time.
- Say you are sorry about what happened to their loved one and about their pain.
- Allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share.
- Encourage them to be patient, not to expect too much, and not to impose too many “shoulds” upon themselves.
- Allow them to talk about the special, endearing qualities of the loved one who has died.
- Reassure them that the care their loved one received was the best possible, or whatever else you know to be true and positive.
- If the loved one who has died is a child, give special attention to the loved one’s brothers and sisters at the funeral and in the months to come. They too are hurt, confused and in need of attention, which their parents may not be able to give them at this time.

Supporters Who Will Follow You

Health and Social/Psychological Support

Before you leave, tell the Next of Kin that counselling and other support services are available, and that Victim Services will be able to help them access long term support services whenever they are ready.

It is very important to keep next of kin informed of any ongoing processes

Going Above and Beyond

The manner in which you conduct yourself throughout the notification process will reflect not only on you as an individual, but on the organization as a whole.

It is critical that you demonstrate by your words and actions that you care about the next of kin and they matter to you and your organization.

Remember that the Next of Kin will remember you for a long time. There may be times in the future when you will see each other again and the compassion and caring you display will be recalled.

Death Notification Protocol – Recap

- Be absolutely certain of the deceased's identity
- Get medical information about the persons to be notified if possible
- Go in person – do not call
- Take someone with you
- Consider talking about your personal and professional reactions to the death circumstances with your partner
- Present credentials and ask to come in to the residence
- Sit down. Ask them to sit down, and be sure that you have the nearest next of kin

Bottom Line

- Inform simply and directly, with warmth and compassionate honesty
- Do not discount feelings, theirs or yours
- Join the survivors in their grief (without allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by it)
- Encourage questions and offer to make calls
- Talk to media only after discussion with the family
- Do not leave survivors alone
- Give written information (depending upon the emotional state of primary survivor)
- If identification of the body is necessary, provide transportation to and from
- Make sure you have communicated with Victim Support Services
- Let the survivors know you care
- **Remember: in time – in person – in simple language – with compassion**

NOTES

NOTES