

DYNAMIC LEARNING EXERCISE

INSTRUCTOR KEY

Death Notification

Instructor Notes: This dynamic exercise has two components: a group activity and a role-play exercise. The group activity asks students to discuss components of death notification while the second provides students an opportunity to actually perform a death notification in a simulated setting.

Time Frame:

Group activity (with discussion): 30 minutes

Role-play exercise (use as a rotating station in a lab setting or as role-play during lecture setting): 15 minutes per role-play (with discussion)

[A blank student copy of this exercise is included.](#)

EMS frequently "calls" codes at the scene. This results in EMS providers having to tell family members that a loved one has died—that resuscitation has stopped and there is no more hope. EMS providers at all levels lack training and experience in these situations. This dynamic learning exercise is designed to provide experience in death notification and compassion at difficult times.

You have just ceased resuscitation of a patient. The family is gathered in a room nearby. You get up off the floor and realize that you must tell the family that their father died. He was stricken suddenly after a family dinner after being in relatively good health.

What will your first few sentences to the gathered family be?

It is usually best to be direct and clear. For example, "I'm sorry to have to tell you that your (family member/relative/loved one) died. We worked hard and did everything medically possible. I'm so very sorry for your loss."

What words or phrases should you avoid?

Avoid unclear words that are substitutes for "died" like gone, went away, lost, etc. Don't say things like "I know how you feel." Because you don't.

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What emotions will you expect to feel during and after the notification?

Death notification is surprisingly difficult. It is normal to feel emotions. Working a code can be mechanical/technical. Death notifications are personal.

The family wants to see their relative before the funeral home or coroner takes him. Should you allow this? Is there anything you should do first?

This depends a lot on whether it is a crime scene and what level of investigation will be done. Generally, and if not contraindicated by policy, police, or protocol, the patient's body can be made a bit more presentable (often covered with a blanket or sheet up to the chest, clean up any body fluids, and move equipment off to the side) and the family can be allowed to see. They may have been present for some or all of the resuscitation.

What differences would you expect in reaction from the family if the patient has terminal cancer and the death was expected?

The concept of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are certainly different when a death is expected as opposed to sudden—but individual's reactions are just that: individual.

What should you do for the family after the notification? What are their needs?

While everyone's needs vary, family members desperately need to know what happens next. This is an unfamiliar situation. The stress and emotion reduce memory and cognition. Write down important things like who was notified (e.g. family members), where the body of their loved one will be taken, and steps to do next. They will be grateful for this after you leave.

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Death notification and dealing with those left behind is complex. These instructor notes are general guidelines. Additional resources are available for the student and educator.

Additional Resources:

Limmer Education—7 Things Death & Dying Podcast:

<https://rss.com/podcasts/limmereducation/820610/>

<https://www.jems.com/patient-care/performing-and-emotionally-surviving-notifications-of-death-to-a-patient-s-family/>

<https://www.hmpgloballearningnetwork.com/site/emsworld/article/1225347-ems-death-communication>

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Group Activity – Death Notifications – Exercise 1

Cut out the two sections below as separate instructions to provide to participants in a group or lab exercise setting. One provides notes for a student or educator acting as a family member and the other for the EMS provider.

Family Member	EMS Provider
<p>You are playing the role of a person who couldn't wake up their spouse. EMS responds and finds that the spouse is dead. There will be no resuscitation.</p> <p>There are several general ways the spouse can react to the situation. These are guidelines to be expanded upon:</p> <p>"I don't believe that. She/he is sleeping and I need you to wake them up. Really. I can't believe this!"</p> <p>"You have to do something. We've been together for so long, I don't know what I would do without him/her."</p> <p>You look blankly at the EMS provider giving the news and say absolutely nothing with an emotionless appearance.</p> <p>Other reactions are possible. They should be realistic and emotional (but not to the point where safety is a concern).</p>	<p>You responded to a home for a possible cardiac arrest. The caller couldn't wake up their spouse.</p> <p>Your examination revealed lividity and a patient who is cool to the touch. Resuscitation isn't indicated.</p> <p>You must now tell the caller that their spouse is dead.</p>

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Group Activity – Death Notifications – Exercise 2

Family Member	EMS Provider
<p>You are playing the role of a person who is waiting for news after EMS responded for a "person down" in the yard and found a code. The EMS provider will tell you that the patient has died.</p> <p>There are several general ways the spouse can react to the situation. These are guidelines to be expanded upon:</p> <p>"I don't believe that. She/he is very, very healthy. Really. Just had a check-up last month. I can't believe this!"</p> <p>"You have to do something. We've been together for so long, I don't know what I would do without him/her."</p> <p>You look blankly at the EMS provider giving the news and say absolutely nothing with an emotionless appearance.</p> <p>Other reactions are possible. They should be realistic and emotional (but not to the point where safety is a concern).</p> <p>You can ask whether the EMS crews can take the patient off the lawn so neighbors won't see.</p>	<p>You responded to a home for a possible cardiac arrest. The caller saw a spouse collapse while working in the yard.</p> <p>You worked the code for more than 30 minutes without ROSC or signs of improvement. The code was called.</p> <p>You must now tell the caller that their spouse is dead.</p>

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You have just ceased resuscitation of a patient. The family is gathered in a room nearby. You get up off the floor and realize that you must tell the family that their father and grandfather died. He was stricken suddenly after a family dinner after being in relatively good health.

What will your first few sentences to the gathered family be?

What words or phrases should you avoid?

What emotions will you expect to feel during and after the notification?

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The family wants to see their relative before the funeral home or coroner takes him. Should you allow this? Is there anything you should do first?

What differences would you expect in reaction from the family if the patient has terminal cancer and the death was expected?

What should you do for the family after the notification? What are their needs?

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