



The Maguire Communication Skills Training Unit
The School of Oncology, The Christie NHS Foundation Trust

Difficult Conversations (breaking bad news)

A resource for staff where treatment is postponed or no longer an option during the COVID-19 pandemic

Principles

1. Warning shots

prefaced with words such as "unfortunately", "sadly", "I'm afraid" followed by a pause will help people to prepare for the information. "Unfortunately/ sadly due to the current situation we are having to....."

2. Compassion and honesty

in equal parts. "I'm sorry we have to delay your treatment for up to three months"

3. Empathy

verbally acknowledging people's feelings and worries helps to reduce their distress. Avoid phrases like "I understand" try instead to reflect back their words and feelings. "You said you were worried". "You sound frightened".

4. Acknowledge and clarify questions before responding

to reassure the patient that they have been heard and check exactly what information is needed. "You are asking how long it will be....can I ask exactly what you mean by that?"

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How the conversation might run

N.B in the context of a full consultation this would follow establishing perception i.e.what the person is expecting, their priorities and concerns

(1st Warning shot) "Unfortunately, because of the COVID- 19 situation we are having to review the treatment plans for all of our patients"pause

(2nd Warning shot) "This is because some treatments would leave patients at greater risk from the virus than from the cancer itself"pause

(Deliver bad news with compassion and honesty) "I'm afraid ,having weighed up the risks and benefits this means we have to postpone (the treatment) we had planned for you....." or "I'm afraid this means that (the treatment) is no longer an option for you..... I'm so very sorry"

Pause allow person to respond

(Empathy) "I can hear how distressed/ angry/ frightened you are" (Be careful not to change or minimise the emotion)

(Acknowledge and clarify questions) "You are worried this means that the cancer will progress and you are asking whether this means we might be unable to treat it..... is that right?"

(Compassion and honesty) "I'm afraid we can't rule that out....."

Next steps can be discussed when the person has had opportunity to voice their concerns and questions

Survival Tips

Don't be too hard on yourself.

Bad news is bad news and people will be upset. However your kindness and compassion can make a huge difference to how they cope.

You are not responsible for the situation or for other people's responses to it.

Verbally acknowledging the emotion you are hearing will help both the patient and you to manage it.

For further advice on support and signposts to training in compassionate, effective communication please contact:

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