Care of the Family

Preparing to talk with families before, during, and after death

1. Ground Yourself First

I will slow down now. I am aware and clear on what I must tell the family.

Grounding immediately connects you with the present moment and enables you to meet the needs of a stressful situation by slowing down and focusing.

- Stop and take ten conscious breaths before you enter the room.
- Review the patient's chart - be prepared.
- Consult with other staff.

2. Cultivate Presence of Mind

Even if I feel helpless, I can still be present to support the family.

In acute care, dying and death are part of daily work, but for a family, the death of someone is a life-changing event and possibly the most significant event of their life. To provide compassionate care, you need to be fully present-physically and mentally-as you speak with the family.

- Let other staff know what you are doing and that you should not be disturbed unless necessary.
- Become aware of your thoughts and emotions.
- Remind yourself this is a life-changing event for this family.

3. Create an Emotional Space for Grief

This is not about me but about the griever. I will not judge how they respond to the news.

Creating space for grief is more than finding a private place to speak with the family. Be prepared for various grief reactions-crying, wailing, shock, anger, disbelief, and more.

- Remind yourself that witnessing someone's grief is a privilege.
- Prepare yourself for the family to grieve and respond to their needs by offering your presence and support.

4. Activate Your Deep Listening Skills

I will hear what they need. Listening will make a difference.

Deep listening means removing the need to judge or fix the situation.

- Remind yourself not to interrupt, even during silences.
- Sit with suffering without trying to take the pain away.
- Be engaged in an open-minded way.
- Focus completely on the family.

5. What TO Say

“I am so sorry this has happened and I am here to support you.”
Supportive statements include:

- “I don’t know what to say, but I am here for you.”
- “This must be difficult.”
- “You have been through a lot.”
- “Take your time.”
- “What are the questions you might have?”

6. What NOT to Say

Avoid trying to make someone feel better. Often the best thing you can do is witness the pain.

Avoid assumptions or platitudes such as:

- “They are no longer suffering.”
- “It’s God’s will.”
- “It was his/her time to go.”
- “You need to be strong for the family.”
- “I know how you feel..”
- “At least……”

7. Responding to Grief

My role is to validate the griever's feelings and experience.

You might hear someone say, "I shouldn't be so emotional; my father was 96 years old. He lived a good life." A validating response would be:

- "He was your father; you have lost someone very significant in your life."
- "Grieving for your father is very natural. I can see you loved him very much."

Additional guidance:

- Give permission for the griever to take their time.
- Let people know it's OK to cry.
- Don't interrupt; keep comments brief.
- If they wish to be alone, tell them where they can find you.
- Expect possible denial.
- Recognize that every person will react differently in their grief.

Source: Modified from the Grief Support Centre's "How to Care and What to Say" workshop, Calgary 2026.