

# Breaking Bad News

A Thrive Worldwide Resource

**How to break bad news isn't always part of management training. And it's something you would hope to never have to do.**

But if you are a manager in a humanitarian organisation, it's likely that in the event of a crisis or tragedy, you will have to break bad news to your team. And the way in which you do so is shown to have a lasting impact on how an individual and team responds to the situation. In fact, doing it well can be a meaningful experience for you and the people you're speaking with.

There are a variety of situations that would require you to break bad news. It may be a matter of a staff member dying unexpectedly from an illness. Or you may have been working to secure the release of an abducted staff person with confidentiality considerations for weeks.

You may be the first person that your team hears the news from, or some may have already heard the news. Conveying news as soon as possible prevents misinformation and helps to build trust. In any scenario, there will be mixed responses. Recognise that the circumstance around a staff member's death may trigger

past painful memories for some.

The following '5 Ps' of breaking bad news provides a basic and reliable framework for this difficult meeting:

## **1 BE PRESENT**

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Our first piece of advice is to be present. As simple as it sounds, it can be hard to do - your own anxieties about not knowing what to say, mixed with hyperactive feelings of needing to be productive, can stand in the way of authentic and caring presence.

## **2 PREPARE**

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Write down what you would like to cover and bring these points with you to the meeting. Enlist the support of a colleague or two to review what you will say and to accompany you to meet the staff. Liaise with the Crisis Management Team (if activated) and get as much information as possible, including what will happen next, and any ongoing supports available.



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## **3 PRESENT INFORMATION**

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You should present information to the whole team, and create an atmosphere that respects a variety of responses. When giving bad news, be direct and compassionate. Tell them what happened and what will happen next. If information needed to be kept from team members (ie kidnapping), explain why that was important.

Let team members know what is going to happen next and, if appropriate, invite them to participate. This may include funeral arrangements, commemorations, and memorials. Point them towards committee

leaders if they have been formed. Provide preliminary information on time-off and return to work.



**Hearing bad news may disorient some people and so information will need to be communicated several times.**

#### **4 PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK**

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Provide an opportunity for staff to speak and ask questions. Some staff may have reflections, while others will have questions. Listen attentively and give clear and concise responses; letting them know that you will “look into it”, if you don’t know the answer to a question. Make a note and ensure you communicate back.

Understand that emotional responses will vary: disbelief, sadness, crying, denial, shock, anger, among others. Recognise that someone’s anger is not personal, but an expression of frustration, guilt, or worry. Also understand cultural differences and perceptions of death will influence individual responses. Don’t presume to know how someone may respond.

Other reactions may include:

- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Dwelling on meaningless activities
- Expressing hostility or numbness
- Impulsiveness
- Dependence
- Feeling incompetent

Refer to special psychological support if symptoms are persistent and aggravated, drastically interfere with work, family or social life, present risk of harm to self or others, exhibit addictive behaviours, or present with severe abnormal

symptoms. Yet, assume that most if not all of your team will recover naturally, without specialist intervention.

## 5 PERSONAL WELLBEING

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Lastly, make sure you are leaning on your supports and finding rest. Giving bad news is very stressful. Often times, we have sufficient energy and fortitude in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, but be aware of the “adrenaline crash” and have compassion on your feelings of exhaustion. As explained above, get into a healthy routine and avoid isolating or escaping with drugs or alcohol.

You could also invite external psychosocial support to offer an optional Psychological First Aid (PFA) session within 3 days following the incident. During PFA, it may become apparent that some team members would like additional support. Provide clear information on how to access further psychological support. Invest in building team cohesion and resiliency during good times. This goes a long

way when faced with needing to provide bad news.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- **Disaster Ready’s Management and Leadership Training**  
[disasterready.org/humanitarian-leadership-training](https://disasterready.org/humanitarian-leadership-training)
- **EISF's Liaison & Support During A Crisis**  
[www.eisf.eu/library/familyfirst-liaison-and-support-during-a-crisis/](http://www.eisf.eu/library/familyfirst-liaison-and-support-during-a-crisis/)  
[This is a Family Liaison Manual, and is useful for breaking bad news to family members]
- **Management of Dead Bodies in Disaster Situation**  
[who.int/hac/techguidance/management\\_of\\_dead\\_bodies.pdf](http://who.int/hac/techguidance/management_of_dead_bodies.pdf)  
[A technical manual - chapters 4-5 relate to the psychosocial considerations at the individual and sociocultural level]

Thank you for accessing this resource.  
For more resources and dedicated support:  
**visit [www.thrive-worldwide.org](http://www.thrive-worldwide.org)**  
**email [info@thrive-worldwide.org](mailto:info@thrive-worldwide.org)**

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