

Before the phone call

- Consider which team member is best placed to make the call
- Find a quiet place and minimise any potential disruption
- Establish who is to be contacted and whether they have indicated what times of day they would want to be phoned; and in response to what type of event
- Gather information and consider what you are going to say



During the phone call

- Introduce yourself and where you're calling from
- Establish that you are speaking to the right person and ask if this is an okay time to talk
- Consider asking if there is anyone with them and whether they would prefer to come and talk face to face
 - Avoid euphemisms and try not to rush



Difficult questions

- “**Has he/she died?**” – you could say *“I’m so sorry to tell you this, but he/she became very unwell this evening and sadly, yes he/she has died. I’m so sorry to tell you this news over the phone”*
- If you don’t know the answer to a question don’t be tempted to guess. E.g. if asked “**Why did they die?**” and if you aren’t sure, you could say *“I don’t know what the exact cause was, but I understand that it’s important to you, so I will make sure the team know that you wish to talk about this when you arrive”*

How will they react?

- People may have a wide range of different responses, which may not be related to the way that you have delivered the news
- It may be hard to establish how someone is reacting
- Do not feel as though you must fill any silences but if you wish you could say *“I appreciate that this must be a shock”* or *“I appreciate that this must be very difficult to take in”*

After the phone call

Take time to care for yourself and seek support – these conversations can be difficult and emotionally challenging





Points for discussion

These questions can be used by individual learners or in a group teaching setting:

- Discuss the reasons why breaking the news of a death by telephone is different to doing it in person. How might the fact that we cannot see the other person influence the interaction?
- Consider the types of feelings we experience when a person dies. How might this influence how we feel when we break bad news? How might our feelings influence conversations?
- Discuss the use of the word “sorry” in breaking bad news like this. How does it make you feel? What role does it have in this conversation?
- How might any periods of silence feel to you and the other person?
- Consider what you would do if the person answered the telephone and wasn't in a position to talk privately or was alone. What might you do or say?
- When talking to a family on the telephone, consider the consequences of indicating that a person hasn't yet died when actually they have
- If you have experience of breaking the news of a death by telephone, consider what helped you to feel prepared to deliver the news?
- Are there any key principles about how to deliver the news of a death that might help you break other bad news on the telephone e.g. that a person has been involved in an accident or that their condition has deteriorated?

Please visit www.sad.scot.nhs.uk to watch a short animated film on this topic and for other educational resources on death, dying and bereavement for health and social care professionals