


# Death Notification: Essential Elements & Responder Self Care

Wayne F Dailey, PhD  
Disaster Mental Health Chief, American Red Cross  
Assistant Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry,  
Yale University School of Medicine





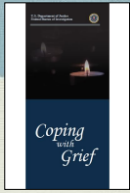
### Death notification in a mass casualty event



- Agree on a plan
- Implement (using 3 person team):
  - Medical examiner or public safety officer
  - Behavioral health clinician
  - Clergy member
- Conduct operational debriefing

9


### What to bring



- Assemble basic information
- Leave packet with family
  - Coping with Grief brochure (on FBI website)
  - Support groups and community resources
  - Support for victims of crime, if applicable

10


### The notification



- Mr. Clark, I have some very bad news I must tell you, your son Jacob has been killed in a shooting at the mall. The shooting occurred at 3:00 PM. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

11

### The reaction



- Sobbing, uncontrollable crying,
- Screaming
- Mute, silence
- Fainting
- Chest pain - watch for heart attack
- Anger/Rage - watch for physical aggression
- Denial, bewilderment, general disbelief

12

## Hard questions



- How did it happen?
- When and where?
- How do you know it's my son? Are you sure?
- When can I see him, where, who do I need to contact?
- What is the condition of his remains?
- When will my loved ones personal items be returned?

13

## What to say



- Refer to the decedent by name
- Express condolences: "I'm so sorry for your loss"
- Normalize their reactions:
  - "Many people react just as you have"
  - "There is no right or wrong way to respond"
  - "This is so very painful"
  - "Words can not convey how difficult this can be"

14

## What not to say



- "Don't worry, you'll get over it soon"
- "Your pain won't last, you'll see"
- "This reminds me of when my Uncle Ed died"
- "You must remain strong"

15

## Potential harm to Client



16

## When family lives far away



17

## Visit ends



- Arrange a follow-up phone call to answer additional questions
- Leave contact info for the Medical Examiner
- Again, offer your condolences
- Take your leave

18



## Potential harm to Responder

- **Vicarious trauma** - Changes in cognitive life of the therapist or responder - the result of cumulative or extremely intense exposure to the experiences of trauma victims
- **Secondary traumatic stress** - emotional duress - when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Symptoms mimic PTSD.



Source: NCTSN

19

- Questions
- Observations based on your own experience

20

## Self-Care



- **Before** - What should I consider before agreeing to participate in a death notification & How should I prepare myself?
- **During** - What can help to sustain me during the notification process?
- **After** - What should I do afterward to reduce my personal risk of harm?

21



## Thank you

Wayne F. Dailey, Ph.D.

[waynefdailey@gmail.com](mailto:waynefdailey@gmail.com)

(860)-304-3762

23