Death Notification: Essential Elements & Responder Self Care

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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

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

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.

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
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?

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”

“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”

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

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?

Thank you

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