

Communication for Medical Providers

Adapted from Vital Talk

vitaltalk.org

Even in a crisis, we can provide compassion and respect to every person for whom we care, and to one another.

Counseling: when coping needs a boost, or emotions are running high

What they say	What you say
I'm scared.	This is such a tough situation. <i>I think anyone would be scared.</i> Could you share more with me?
I need some hope.	Tell me about the things you are hoping for? <i>I want to understand more.</i>
You people are incompetent!	I can see why you are not happy with things. <i>I am willing to do what is in my power to improve things for you.</i> What could I do that would help?
I want to talk to your boss.	I can see that you are frustrated. <i>I will ask my boss to come by as soon as they can. Please realize they are juggling many things right now.</i>
Do I need to say my goodbyes?	I'm hoping that is not the case. And I worry time could be short. What is most pressing on your mind?

Deciding: When things aren't going well, goals of care, code status

What they say	What you say
I want everything possible. I want to live.	We are doing everything we can. This is a tough situation. Could we step back for a moment so I can learn more about you? <i>What do I need to know about you to do a better job taking care of you?</i>
I don't think my spouse would have wanted this.	Well, let's pause and talk about what they would have wanted. Can you tell me what they considered most important in their life? <i>What meant the most to them, gave their life meaning?</i>
I don't want to end up being a vegetable or on a machine.	Thank you, it is very important for me to know that. <i>Can you say more about what you mean?</i>
I am not sure what my spouse wanted – we never spoke about it.	You know, many people find themselves in the same boat. This is a hard situation. To be honest, given their overall condition right now, if we need to put them on a breathing machine or do CPR, they will not make it. The odds are just against us. <i>My recommendation is that we accept that they will not live much longer and allow them to pass peacefully.</i> I suspect that may be hard to hear. What do you think?

Notifying: When you are telling someone about a loved one's death

What they say	What you say
<i>Over the phone:</i> Yes, I'm his daughter. I'm five hours away.	<i>Over the phone:</i> I have something serious to talk about with you. Are you in a place where you can talk?
What is going on? Has something happened?	I am calling about your <i>father</i> . He died a short time ago. The cause was [brief explanation of cause].
[Crying]	I am so sorry for your loss. [Silence] [If you feel you must say something: Take your time. I am here.]
I knew this was coming, but I didn't realize it would happen this fast.	I can only imagine how shocking this must be. It is sad. [Silence] [Wait for them to restart]

Anticipating: When you're worrying about what might happen

What you fear	What you can do
That patient's child is going to be very angry.	Before you go into the room or call them, take a moment for one deep breath. What's the anger about? Love, responsibility, fear?
I don't know how to tell this adorable grandmother that I can't put her in the ICU and that she's going to die.	Remember what you can do: you can hear what she's concerned about, you can explain what's happening, you can help her prepare, you can be present. These are gifts.
I have been working all day with infected people. I am worried I could be passing this on to the people who matter most to me.	Talk to them about what you are worried about. You can decide together what is best. There are no simple answers, but worries are easier to bear when you share them.
I am afraid of burnout, and of losing my heart.	Can you look for moments every day where you connect with someone, share something, enjoy something? It is possible to find little pockets of peace, a few good things, even in the middle of a maelstrom.
I'm worried that I will be overwhelmed and that I won't be able to do what is really the best for my patients.	Check your own state of being, even if you only have a moment. If one extreme is wiped out, and the other is feeling strong, where am I on the spectrum now? Remember that whatever your own state, these feelings are part of our humanity. Can you accept them, then decide what you need?