Talking to relatives

Your guide to compassionate phone communication during COVID-19

1. Introduction

Introduction

Hello my name is [name], I am [role].

Speak slowly

I'm calling to give you an update on your mother Mary.

Open with a question

Are you OK to talk right now?

When conveying bad news

Do you have someone with you for support?

Establish what they know

Can you tell me what you know about your mum's condition?

2. Effectively displaying empathy

Listen

*I am so sorry.
Please, take your time.*

Empathise

*It must be very hard to take this in, particularly over the phone.
Is there anything I can do right now to make it easier for you?*

Acknowledge

*I can hear how upset you are.
We know how hard it is when you are unable to visit at such an important time.*

If possible, offer a virtual connection

Would you like to talk with Mary over the phone or see her via video call?

DO

Use simple language remember to pause.

Use the person's name.

Be clear with your information and statements.

DO NOT

Use jargon.

Use unclear phrases.

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3. Helpful concepts

Honesty with uncertainty

It looks like Mary is improving, but it's hard to predict with COVID-19.

We need to take it day-by-day and keep a close eye on Mary, as things may change very quickly.

I can't promise that things will be ok but I can promise that we will always be honest and help you understand what is going on.

Sick enough to die

Mary is very unwell and her body is getting tired. Unfortunately she's now so sick that she could die in the next few hours to days.

Hope for the best, plan for the worst

There are treatments that might help Mary get better, like giving oxygen to help her breathe, but we're worried she may not recover.

We're doing all we can, but we need to talk about what to do if Mary gets sicker.

Death

I'm so sorry to tell you this over the phone, but sadly Mary died a few minutes ago.

If possible, reassure that someone was present

Giving details about whether it was peaceful, and whether the person had personalised care are also helpful.

4. Ending the call

Don't rush

Before I say goodbye, do you have any questions?

Next steps

Do you need any further information or support?

5. After the call

These situations and conversations can be difficult

Debrief with a colleague or manager.

Contact the Employee Assistance Program or another support service.

Ensure you document your conversation in the person's medical record.

The Pandemic Kindness Movement may also be helpful **aci.health.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/kindness**

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