



## **The Importance of Counselor Awareness and Training in the Death Notification Process: A New Role for Professional Counselors**

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Historically, professional counselors have not served in the capacity as first responders in the death notification process. More often, counselors become involved with clients after the notification to assist individuals in dealing with the grieving and healing process. As roles and job opportunities become more diverse in the communities for professional counselors (e.g., crisis centers, police departments, fire departments, military settings, religious settings, chaplaincies, crisis centers, hospitals) the likelihood of participating in, or leading, a death notification increases. Even in a private practice, it is not unforeseen to be asked to assist with a death notification or be consulted about how to tell another family member about a death. All death notifications differ due to the actual event, unique relationship, and perception of the death by the survivor. Indeed counselors have most likely been involved in this process in their personal lives, therefore, education about effective death notification is important.

Stewart, Lord, and Mercer (2000) found that 40% of the 70% of professionals who had given at least one death notification had no formal training in this area. The level of preparedness of the professional counselor in the notification process may effect the reaction and the traumatic impact of the delivery on the survivor, reduce professional burnout (Stewart, 1999), affect the bereavement process, and may impact whether a person seeks professional counseling in the future. Leash (1996) suggested the ideal death notifier is a professional who has ample time to support survivors, possesses the skills to help another cope with grief, is able to provide resources associated with the loss, and who is comfortable responding to a variety of emotional reactions. No counselor can ever be fully prepared for the response of the person receiving a death notification, however there are crucial aspects necessary in providing the most supportive and effective death notification. As outlined in the training protocol for the Maryland State Police (2001) and adjusted to meet the role of the professional counselor, death notifications should be provided in person, in pairs, in an appropriate time frame, in plain language, and with compassion.

### **Supportive and Effective Delivery**

The human presence during the notification of the death of a loved one is essential. Counselors can assist clients during the initial shock of the notification which can be demobilizing and help to formulate a plan with the survivor as to how to notify others. It is a highly recommended best practice to work in pairs for safety precautions, to provide assistance to multiple victims, and for professionals to debrief after the notification. Team members may include a combination of law enforcement officers, professional counselors, pastoral counselors, clergy, school counselors, social workers, or others depending on the counselor's agency setting or manner of death (Maryland State

Police, 2001). Timeliness of a death notification is essential so that an individual is informed in person by the appropriate individual rather than by hearing it from outside sources. However, it is crucial to verify the accuracy of information in a timely manner prior to contacting a survivor. Agencies and schools should designate a point contact person and an alternate prior to any event who will be responsible for verifying and dispensing information. Even if a team is formed to gather information, only one person should be designated as the communicator to ensure the information was indeed delivered and to avoid conflicting or inaccurate information which could create unnecessary crises.

It is important that the death notification be given to the survivor in a calm, direct, and simple manner by the crisis counselor (Maryland State Police, 2001). Too much information or vague information can cause survivors to panic and be confused. A professional counselor can demonstrate care by clear and concise language in the notification although the delivery may seem distant and cold. For example, "I have some very bad news to tell you," or a similar statement allows a brief but crucial moment for the survivor to prepare for the shock. The follow-up statement should also be provided in plain language, such as "Your daughter, Jill, was in a car crash and she was killed." It is important to avoid vague statements such as, "Jill was lost, hurt, or passed away." It is important to include a definitive conclusion of what occurred such as "...and she was killed" or "...there were no survivors." This prevents against false hope of survival (Maryland State Police, 2001). It is important to refer to the victim by name to provide another level of verification and to personalize the deceased.

### **Survivor's Reactions and Emotions**

One of the most important gifts a counselor can offer to a survivor is the gift of calmness and compassion during the death notification. Over-emotional counselors can increase the potential for panic or chaos. Survivors often have many questions and some questions may be asked multiple times in an attempt to comprehend the facts and verify the death notification. It is crucial to patiently answer questions about the circumstances regarding the death that a crisis counselor may be privy. However, the decision to share this information should always take into consideration the developmental stage and clinical assessment of the survivor at the time of the notification. Often times, the counselor may not know the answer to a question and it is better to acknowledge this to the survivor than to give false information. If there are questions the professional counselor has offered to explore, it is imperative to follow-up directly with the survivor even if another agency or office will be contacting them to provide the information.

The shock of a death notification may trigger an array of emotions and behaviors by the survivor. It is important for a professional counselor to acknowledge the survivor's reactions and emotions to the death notification and to recognize personal emotions associated with the notification. Whereas over-emotional counselors can increase confusion and possible panic with survivors, it is better for a counselor to express appropriate emotion than to appear cold and unfeeling. It is crucial to relay that death is a personal event and each person's responses to grief will differ due to the unique situation and may include stages of sadness, anger, frustration, relief, and guilt. This normalization of emotions and responses experienced during the grief process is important to convey to survivors. Print resources about the grieving process, common reactions to grief, explaining death to a child, and referrals for mental health may be helpful and can be left with the victim. Imposing personal religious beliefs is not helpful and could be harmful. Statements such as, "This was God's will," "She led a full life," and "I understand what you are going through," do not demonstrate compassion or regard for the person's unique grief experiences associated with loss. However, it may be important for you to gather information regarding religious beliefs and customs in order to refer or guide the person to their religious leaders, if appropriate.

### Follow-up

Counselors should always leave appropriate contact information with survivors and any follow-up should be completed in a timely manner. Most survivors are confused at the initial notification and others may feel abandoned after the notification. Some individuals may request assistance from counselors for funeral arrangements or with other family members. If a counselor is asked by the survivor to help with these plans and it falls in the role of the counselor's job description, it is imperative to assist the survivor based on the customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and personal preferences of the family. Following up is an important last step in completing the death notification process and may be a crucial factor enabling a survivor to reach out for future mental health services. The death notification may be the first exposure a survivor has to a mental health professional, so the interaction could encourage or discourage further connections with professional counselors.

Debriefing with team members should occur immediately after the death notification process. This debriefing time should be used to plan for any follow-up contact with the survivors and to review how the death notification process was implemented and received. Processing what went well and what could be improved upon will be helpful for future death notifications (Maryland State Police, 2001). Additionally, death notifications can be stressful and emotionally draining to those involved in giving death notifications and it is important to discuss feelings or thoughts associated with the death notifications that may have

triggered personal unresolved grief. Taking care of oneself is essential when taking care of another person's initial grief.

### Conclusion

The probability of a professional counselor being involved in providing a death notification has increased over the years due to expanded job responsibilities and employment settings, yet research suggests there is little training preparedness for counselors in this area. It is likely that at least once in a person's life, either personally or professionally, one will be asked to give or assist in a death notification. Most individuals are able to recollect the manner in which a death of a loved one was delivered to them and how it may have impacted the grief and healing process, for better or worse.

In a tribute to the troops who sacrificed the ultimate price for our country, *Final Salute: A Story of Unfinished Lives*, the author Jim Sheeler (2008) tracks the lives of many in our military who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also honors and shares the stories of family members, their unique reactions when they were first informed about the loss of their loved one, and their mourning and healing process. Indeed, no one can ever eliminate the grief associated with the loss of a loved one but the manner of delivery may have a lasting impact on the family members who have received a notification of death.

It is critical for counselors to be educated and gain awareness of the notification process as well as learn effective skills needed to make an effective death notification. Surely, this will benefit the counselor and the survivor. Without appropriate training, counselors report feeling helpless and powerless in this process (Ender & Hermsen, 1996) which may lead to professional burnout and job stress. However, effective death notifications may decrease additional traumatization by the survivor and may facilitate the start of a healthy bereavement process in working through the loss of a loved one (Stewart, 1999), a lasting gift often unknown by the counselor.

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