

A teaching videotape
designed
to promote discussion about

**BREAKING
BAD NEWS**

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in conjunction with
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and
Oscott Theological College

Breaking Bad News

Introduction

This videotape is designed to promote discussion in a small group. It does not purport to teach anything by itself but merely to record what happened on three different occasions. In order to use the tape the tutor should familiarise him/herself with the content and read this guide. Just as breaking bad news itself is infinitely variable so will be the response of different groups of students or trainees.

Aim: to develop discussion among small groups about:

- 1 who should break the news
- 2 how to prepare oneself for the task
 - i factually
 - ii emotionally
- 3 planning of where to break the bad news
- 4 how to find help
- 5 how to begin
- 6 use of verbal communication
- 7 use of non-verbal communication
 - i eye contact
 - ii physical proximity
 - iii touch
- 8 barriers to communication
- 9 expression of newsbreaker's own emotion
- 10 how to cope with emotion
 - i in recipient
 - ii in newsbreaker
- 11 understanding variation in recipient's emotional response
 - i denial
 - ii anger at informant
at God/fate
at him/herself
 - iii guilt
 - iv bizarre behaviour humour/hysteria
- 12 use of techniques e.g. prayer
- 13 has the message got through and been understood?
- 14 how to conclude and leave
- 15 coping with newsbreaker's emotions after the event
- 16 arrangements to follow up

George Stevenson

At 7.15pm on a summer evening George Stevenson was knocked off his bicycle and killed by a truck.

The accident was witnessed by Father Quinn, the parish priest, who knew George's parents Thelma and John Stevenson well.

Dialogue:

FQ Where's John?

TS He's just up the garden, I'll just go and get him...sit down a moment.

JS Hallo Father, what can I do for you? I suppose it's the church roof again - you look that serious!

FQ John, Thelma can we sit down? I have something to say to you both. **TS** Of course...what is it?

FQ I'm afraid it's George...he's been knocked off his bicycle by a lorry...! saw it happen...he must have gone instantly...he didn't stand a chance...

TS But I've just seen him...I've just spoken to him...he was bringing his bike in...I've just seen him...

JS You're sure it's him?

FQ I'm afraid there can be no doubt...

FQ Look I've never done anything like this before... when I'm not sure how to help I usually pray...may I? Dear Lord, I don't know how to help Thelma and John in their distress, please guide me...

Points for discussion
debating pros/cons where appropriate

Do priests often have to break bad news?

Was Father Quinn the appropriate person to break the news?

If not Father Quinn who else?

Who would be best?

Had he prepared himself for the task?

How might he have been better prepared?

Was home the right place?

Where else could the news have been broken: hospital? vicarage?
church?

Was Father Quinn under control of his own emotions?

Apart from verbal communication how else were the three people's
feelings shared?

What is the mother's reaction?

Is this expected?

What is the father's reaction?

Is this expected?

Was the use of touch by the mother and the priest appropriate?

What constrains the use of touch when breaking bad news?

Was the use of prayer appropriate?

Is this something just for a priest or religious person or can anyone use
it?

How is Father Quinn going to leave?

What arrangement could be made for a follow up?

Sheila Peters

*Sheila's parents Janet and Stanley
Peters Police Constable Howard
Policewoman Thompson*

Dialogue:

JP Have a lovely term darling. Don't forget to write to Gran'pa...you know how worried I am about him. See if you can persuade him to go into that home.

Sheila All right Mum...look I must go...Look after yourselves and I'll see you after the exams. Bye!

PCH Do you reckon this is it?

WPCT Rose Cottage isn't it? I'll just go and look.

PCH This is the part of the job I really hate...especially when you don't know what we're dealing with.

WPCT Yes this is it.

PCH The sergeant at Oxford didn't say an awful lot. There was a party...a lot of booze and drugs I suppose... Do you think there's anyone in?

WPCT Yeah, there's someone coming now.

SP Who's there?

PCH It's the police, Sir.

SP The police?

PCH Good morning Sir; I'm sorry to disturb you but are you Mr Stanley Peters?

SP Oh God...We've been half expecting you. Janet's father has been an accident waiting to happen...Don't stand on the doorstep, come along in...

continued.

PCH Thank you Sir. I'm Police Constable Howard and this is my colleague WPC Thompson...

WPCT Is Mrs Peters at home?

SP Yes of course...she's upstairs in bed...shall I call her?

WPCT Perhaps that would be a good idea...We're sorry to cause this disturbance so late...

SP I'll just get Janet...it may take a moment or two...

SP It's the police...I think it must be something to do with your father...better put something on and come down.

PCH We're very sorry to disturb you Mrs Peters...shall we all sit down?

JP Tell me what happened...! know father's been behaving very strangely...he really shouldn't be left. We have tried to get him to go into a home...but he just wouldn't...

PCH Mrs Peters it's not your father...it's your daughter Sheila. It seems she went to a party in Oxford last night...we don't know quite what happened...it seems she was taken ill. She collapsed in the toilet. She was dead when her friends found her.

JP Sheila?...She can't be...I spoke to her on the phone only last night.

PCH How did she sound then?

JP Absolutely normal...there must be some mistake

SP Are you sure it was Sheila?

PCH I am afraid so Sir, we've no formal identification of course, but the Oxford Police were certain from her friends at the party.

SP But you have no certain identification?

PCH Not yet Sir.

SP What sort of party was it...I mean... I don't trust these young people today...

PCH Why do you say that Sir?

continued

SP Well, you know, drugs and so on. A perfectly fit girl doesn't just go and die for no reason...

PCH Was Sheila in the habit of taking drugs Sir?

SP No of course not. She's... she was far too sensible. Somebody must have done something...

WPCT We have no reason to believe that this is anybody's fault.

SP That's a damn silly thing to say!.... I'm sorry I shouldn't speak to you like that...you're being very kind...

WPCT That's all right; I can guess how you feel... Is there anyone you want here? Anyone I can call?

SP No we'll be alright...unless...Janet would you like your sister here? She only lives in the village, I'll get her number, perhaps it would be better if I phoned her myself...

Points for discussion
debating pros/cons where appropriate

Did the police manage this better than the priest?

Give reasons for your opinion.

What might have been improved?

Appropriateness of middle of night?

Were the police adequately informed?

What advantages were there in there being two of them?

Was the gender of the newsbreaker important?

Was the verbal communication too direct?

Was the police method of handling disbelief/denial and anger appropriate?

Was non-verbal communication good?

Could seating have been improved?

Was correct use made of touch?

How can the police leave?

What arrangement could be made for a follow-up?

Mark Pierce

Dialogue:

Brenda Pierce Don't think much of this place... look at that - they don't even keep it clean. Dunno what the National 'Ealth's coming to these days. Kept you waiting long enough to get 'ere to get 'ere rupture done but I 'spect you'll be sent 'ome before you're ready jus' like our 'Arry...

Mark Pierce Lay off it Bren... Cor, I couldn't 'alf use a fag...

Dr Lara Miller Mr Pierce? Hallo I'm Dr Miller. I just want to ask you a few questions...

Mark Pierce came in for a routine hernia repair. Quite unexpectedly he arrested on the operating table and all attempts to resuscitate him failed.

BP What's happened? You said he'd be back from his operation hours ago.

LM Mrs Pierce I'm afraid I've got bad news. Your husband had a heart attack just as we started the operation; we did all we could but I'm afraid...

BP 'E can't 've done... 'e was 'ere a little while ago and I was just talking to 'im... 'E'"asn't even finished papering the sitting room.... if the bloody National 'Ealth 'd sent for 'im two years ago when 'e started 'is 'ernia trouble this would never 'ave 'appened. Oh Gawd...what am I going to tell 'is mother?

Points for discussion
debating pros/cons where appropriate

Did the doctor manage this better than the priest or the police?

Give reasons for your opinion.

What might have been improved?

One has the impression she was told by a senior doctor to go and talk to the widow...does this happen?

Was the setting in this bleak waiting room appropriate?

Could it have been improved?

Who should break the news?

Was the doctor adequately informed?

Was the doctor adequately prepared?

Should anyone else have been present?

Was the gender of the newsbreaker important?

Was the verbal communication too direct?

Was the doctor's method of handling disbelief/denial and anger appropriate?

Was her response to Brenda's seemingly inappropriate reaction adequate?

Was non-verbal communication good?

Could their positions during the interview have been improved?

Could touch have been used?

Brenda may want to smoke...however much we disapprove should she be allowed to?

How can the doctor leave?

What arrangement could be made for a follow-up?

Finally summing up:
(Perhaps use an overhead projector for
summary!)

Breaking Bad News

This is always difficult.

But it can be made easier by:

PREPARATION

Is the most appropriate person breaking the news?

Consider gender, relationship, seniority, one person or two?

Is the newsbreaker in command of as much fact as
possible?

...in command of his/her own emotions?

Has the site and timing of newsbreaking been carefully considered?

Are there adequate seating arrangements?

Has the verbal communication been thought through?

Has non-verbal communication been thought through?

Have possible reactions been considered?

THE INTERVIEW

Words used.

Use of expression/emotion (is it appropriate to weep?)

Touch.

THE CONCLUSION

How does the newsbreaker leave without making things worse?

What arrangements are made for continuing immediate support?

What arrangements are made for follow-up?