

# Last Journey: Compassionate Communication in End-of-Life Care

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**Abstract:** *End-of-life care is a critical component of nursing that requires sensitivity, empathy, and effective communication. This article explores the essential aspects of supporting patients and families during this challenging time. It highlights strategies for breaking bad news using the SPIKES model, which provides a structured approach to delivering distressing information compassionately<sup>1</sup>. The article also discusses the importance of transparent and empathetic communication with families, ensuring trust and emotional support<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, it emphasizes fulfilling patients' last wishes, making their final moments meaningful, and providing dignified post-mortem care. Cultural sensitivity and bereavement support are also key considerations in respecting the deceased and aiding families through their grief<sup>3</sup>. By integrating these approaches, healthcare professionals can ensure a humane and dignified transition for patients and their loved ones.*

**Keywords:** End of life, last journey, breaking bad news, family support, respect to deceased

## I. INTRODUCTION

Providing care at the end of life is an emotionally intense and complex part of healthcare. Nurses play a crucial role in supporting patients and their families during this difficult time, ensuring that the transition is handled with dignity, respect, and compassion. This article explores the strategies for breaking bad news, effective communication with families, fulfilling last wishes, making every moment meaningful, and respecting the deceased.

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN END-OF-LIFE CARE

### Emotional and Psychological Impact on Families

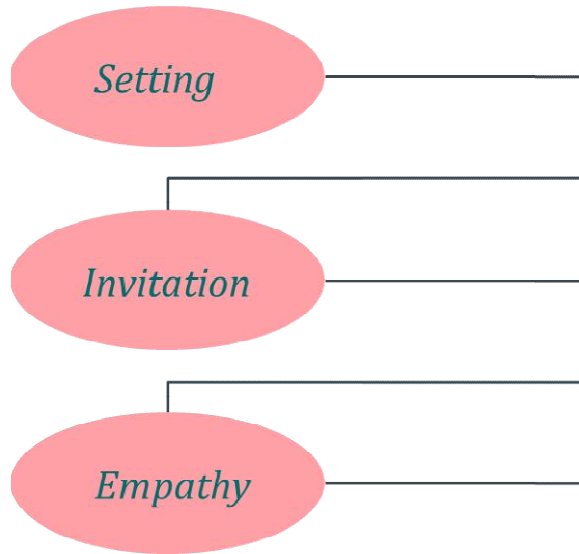
Receiving news about a terminal illness or the impending death of a loved one is profoundly distressing. Families often experience a range of emotions, including shock, denial, anger, and grief. The way healthcare professionals communicate this news can significantly affect how families cope with the situation<sup>2</sup>.

### The Role of Healthcare Professionals

Nurses and doctors are not just providers of medical care; they are also emotional support systems for families. Their approach should be empathetic, clear, and culturally sensitive. Primary consultant/treating physician informs about the approaching death. Communicate in a sensitive and compassionate way with the patient and the family. The staff should avoid talking further if there is any indication that the patient does not want this conversation. Be supportive and compassionate in the communication with using structured models, such as SPIKES, can guide healthcare professionals in delivering distressing news effectively<sup>1</sup>.

## III. STRATEGIES FOR BREAKING BAD NEWS (SPIKES MODEL)

The SPIKES protocol provides a structured approach to delivering bad news in a compassionate and effective manner<sup>1</sup>.



**Fig 1: SPIKES**

**Setting Up the Conversation (S)**

The environment should be private and free from interruptions.. Ensuring that all key family members are present can help avoid miscommunication.

**Assessing the Family’s Perception (P)**

Understanding what the family already knows helps in tailoring the conversation appropriately.

**Obtaining Family’s Invitation (I)**

Some families may want detailed information, while others may prefer gradual disclosure. Respecting their preference is crucial.

**Knowledge Sharing (K)**

Information should be shared in simple, non-technical language, ensuring that families fully understand the situation.

**Addressing Emotions and Responding Empathetically (E)**

Validating emotions and offering reassurance helps in easing distress.

**Summarizing and Strategizing Next Steps (S)**

Summarizing the discussion and outlining the next steps provide clarity and a sense of direction.

**IV. COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES: PROVIDING COMPASSIONATE SUPPORT**

**Building Trust and Transparency**

Honest and transparent communication fosters trust between healthcare professionals and families<sup>2</sup>. Communication should be patient led, gentle and honest.

**Active Listening and Empathy**

Listening attentively and acknowledging emotions make families feel heard and supported. Give space for families react differently, exhibiting sorrow, anxiety, anger, denial, guilt or even relief. Health professionals must be empathetic and extend required support.

**Managing Family Expectations and Conflicts**

Addressing concerns and potential conflicts within the family ensures that patient-centred care remains the focus. Conversations should prepare the family for the approaching death of their loved one

### V. FULFILLING THE LAST WISHES OF PATIENTS

Patient may express some last wishes such as chanting a hymn, playing a song, placing picture of a religious/spiritual figure in front of the patient, wish to meet a best friend, see their pet one last time, celebrate an upcoming special day with family,

Each patient has unique cultural and personal values that should be respected when fulfilling last wishes<sup>4</sup>. Fulfilling the last wishes of the patient is challenging and rewarding to the staff and is an integral part of their duty.

Hospitals and hospices should have mechanisms in place to facilitate last wishes, whether it is a final visit, a special meal, or a religious ritual. These small gestures add dignity to death, while for families it creates positive memories of end-of-life care of their loved ones.

### VI. MAKING EVERY MOMENT MEANINGFUL IN PALLIATIVE CARE

A peaceful and comfortable setting can significantly enhance a patient's final moments.

Encouraging family participation in caregiving fosters a sense of closeness and closure. Family and friends should express themselves with words of love, care, support, and gratitude. Video and voice calls should be arranged if the patient wants to see or talk to someone.

Family and friends can share meaningful conversations with the dying person about the significance of their bond. For example, adult children can share how their father has influenced their lives.

Nurses should encourage friends and families to write sweet notes to the patient every morning. Families can present patient with pictures, images and mementos of things they have memories and emotions attached with.

Maintaining hygiene, dressing the patient respectfully, and ensuring pain management uphold the patient's dignity<sup>3</sup>.

### VII. RESPECTING THE DECEASED: POST-MORTEM CARE AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Put a tag outside the patient room **"The Last journey in progress- please pay your respect"**. Ensure a calm and quiet environment. Nursing staff should pray for the deceased with folded hands and offer condolences to the family. They should receive the family of the deceased with a 'Namaste'. They should ensure the patient surroundings are quiet, and the atmosphere is of grief and loss.

Ensure dignified treatment to the patient. Nurses should remove all equipment, tubes, and used linen. The patient should be sponged and cleaned. Ensure closing of all cuts, abrasions and orifices before packing. Lay the patient on his/her back with arms by side and eyelids closed. The body is packed and covered with clean linen. Ask for any preference in clothes from family members before packing.

Before the trolley moving out all the care givers should line up and allow the trolley to pass and bid farewell to the departed soul with folded hands.



**Fig 2: Health care professionals bidding farewell to the departed soul**

Understanding different cultural and religious practices related to death is essential for providing appropriate post-mortem care. Griefcounselling and support groups help families cope with the loss of a loved one.

#### **VII. CONCLUSION**

End-of-life care requires a compassionate approach that prioritizes effective communication, emotional support, and dignity for the patient and their family. By using structured communication models, respecting patient wishes, and providing post-mortem care with cultural sensitivity, healthcare professionals can ensure that the last journey is as meaningful and peaceful as possible.

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