

COURSE INFORMATION AND INSTRUCTOR PREPARATION

TITLE: DEATH NOTIFICATION

HOURS: 1

GOAL: TO BECOME AWARE OF PROPER PROCEDURES IN THE FUNCTION OF PERFORMING DEATH NOTIFICATION

TEACHING AIDS (CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY):

Chalkboard and chalk

Easel notepad

Whiteboard and markers

VCR/DVD player

Computer and mouse

TV

Multi-media projector

Lectern or table

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES (CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY):

Lecture

Group work

Discussion

Scenario-based training

Individual exercise

Hands-on techniques (i.e. driving, shooting, etc.)

STUDENT MATERIALS

Handout #1 – Listening Skills



REFERENCES

Chapter Six: Crisis Intervention and Death Notification, Community Crisis Response Team Training Manual: Second Edition

Death Notification, by Cindy Kuhr, Executive Director – O.V.W.A.

Death Notification, NFDA, Working with Children Traumatized by Homicide Handbook

Death Notification and Survivor Care Program, UCSF, Charles R. Marmar M.D., Alexis de Raadt-St. James; Craig Van Dyke M. D.

Death Notification – Notifying Our Own About Their Own, by John Cooley

Dublin Division of Police General Order Line of Duty Death Policy, Ohio COPS, Harrison, Ohio

General Information on How Survivors Respond to Death Notification by Wildland Firefighter Foundation

“In Person, In Time” Recommended Procedures for Death Notification, Concerns of Police Survivors, Inc., Dr. Thomas Bennett, State Medical Examiner, the Iowa Organization for Victim Assistance, MADD/Polk County Chapter and Polk County Victim Services

MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, MADD Canada’s Death Notification Training

Police Death Notification Procedures and Survival Family Support, Detroit Police School of Staff and Command, Janice D. Daniels, Eastern Michigan University

Web Site, All Due Respect, by Paul J. Antonellis Jr.
http://www.firechief.com/management/firefighting_due_respect

Web Site, Bearers of Bad News: Worst Part of a Police Officers Job also Called the Most Important, <http://www.ledger.southofboston.com>

Web Site: Chaplain Resources, A Wealth of Information and Resources for Law Enforcement Chaplains. http://coolcalvary.com/chaplaincy/resource_deathnotification.shtml

Web Site: Code of Police Practice, A Guide for First Line Officers, Death Notification
http://rcmp-learning.org/copp/encopp/d_notifi.htm

Web Site: EPERC, End of Life, Fast Fact and Concept #64: Informing Significant Others of a Patients Death. <http://www.mywhatever.com/cifwriter/library/eperc/fastfact/ff64.html>

Web Site: Fast Facts and concept #77: Telephone Notification of Death
<http://www.eperc.mcw.edu/FFforPDA/384.htm>

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Web Site: Heart Attack, Stroke and Cardiac Arrest Warning Signs,
<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.ihtml?identifier=3053>

Web Site: Heart Attack, What are the Symptoms of a Heart Attack
http://medicinenet.com/heart_attack/

Web Site: Medical Encyclopedia, SHOCK,
<http://nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000039.htm>

Web Site: Notification of Death-Traditional Methods of Delivering Death Notifications
<http://deathreference.com/Me-Nu/Notifications-of-Death.html>

Web Site: Shock, <http://nativeremedies.com/ailment/symptoms-of-shock-info.html>

Web Site: The Expert Resource Guide for First Aid, Johnson & Johnson,
<http://jnfirstaid.com/aidn-trauma-shock.jsp>

Web Site: The Road Less Traveled, Death Notification, <http://ohiocops.com/grief/death.html>

Web Site: United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Casualty and Death Notification,
http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_death_notification.html

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

Cindy Kuhr, Executive Director of O.V.W.A.



STUDENT PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

At the end of this topic, the student will be able to:

1. Describe the Model Death Notification Team.
2. List the steps to prepare for “In Person” notification.
3. Describe the process for notifying the next of kin “in person at home” or “in person at work.”
4. List phrases that should not be said to survivors.
5. Describe common reactions of survivors at the time of the notification.
6. List medical emergencies and first aid for shock, heart attack and stroke.
7. List factors that often compound the grieving process for the family.
8. Describe methods of explaining a death to children.
9. List ways the notifier can assist the survivors after the initial notification.
10. Describe methods for the notifier to manage post notification stress.



INTRODUCTION TO DEATH NOTIFICATION

Nobody wants to hear the words that a loved one has died. However, notification of the next of kin must occur and be done with great compassion. Many times this sensitive assignment is done by a peace officer when the cause of death is a result of an accident, suicide or homicide, etc. It is best if the peace officer is a member of a team that provides the death notification. Support for survivors and for the other members of the team can be provided by a victim advocate.

A sudden, unanticipated death is particularly difficult for the survivors as the family has no time to prepare for a life without the loved one. They have been denied the opportunity to say good-bye. They have been given no time to prepare. Grieving family members will remember the moment of the actual death notification for the rest of their lives. They will remember and relive the moment frequently. If death notification is done properly, it will be remembered with kindness and compassion. If it is done improperly it will be remembered as a cold, harsh and bitter event.

Dick Shire, a retired forensics expert with Plymouth County Massachusetts Sheriff's Bureau of Criminal Investigations stated that death notification is the single most important job a police officer does. Shire, who unfortunately has been on the receiving end of a death notification twice, stated, "I say that it's the most important job, because if it's not done right it can leave an indelible stamp on the family. The family receiving that information never forgets who gave it to them and everything surrounding that incident until the day they die. That's the kind of impact it has."

Experts have found with repeated studies, that the person entrusted in the role of notifier greatly affects the direct level of devastation and distress suffered by those receiving the news (MADD Matter, Fall 2003). How do you ensure then that a death notification is conducted in the best possible manner? What do you say and how do you say it? What if a survivor has a medical reaction?

A manual prepared by the Iowa Organization for Victim Assistance summarized the basic principles of death notification as: "In person, In time, In pairs, In plain language, and With compassion." This course is designed to provide information to personnel who must provide death notifications. The goal is to provide information that will aid the notifier with helping the survivor(s) and to deal with his/her own emotional trauma.

NOTE: This course may be taught by the local training officer or supervisory personnel, however, it is recommended that you visit the following web site to find a crime victim advocate in your county to help instruct the course: www.ag.state.oh.us/victim/dir_state.asp click on county and scroll down to find your county. This web site is a good resource of services available for the crime victim including obtaining crime victim advocate services. You may also find assistance at your county prosecutor's office, court mediator services, county jobs and family services office, county sheriff's office, local United Way office, or other public and private agencies.

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THE MODEL DEATH NOTIFICATION TEAM

A. THE MODEL DEATH NOTIFICATION TEAM (SPO # 1)

1. **Research has found that a team consisting of at least one male and one female can be the most effective when delivering such devastating news.**
 - a. **At minimum, two people should notify the survivors.**
 - b. It is helpful to have at least two notifiers in the event that the **notifiers** may need to support each other.
 - c. The notifiers should take separate vehicles but plan to arrive at the same time.
 - d. **Separate vehicles are needed to allow for one member of the team to remain with the survivor(s) if the other needs to leave for other duties or activities associated with the notification.**
 - e. If medical help is needed, one member of the death notification team can assist a survivor while another comforts others.
 - f. It is not uncommon for a survivor to attack a notifier.
 - g. **Ideally, one of the members of the team should be trained to recognize the symptoms of shock, heart attack or other life threatening conditions and render first aid in the event of any of these conditions.**
2. Members of the death notification team should meet as soon as possible after the notification to debrief.
 - a. Review the procedures used and determine what went wrong, what went right and what improvements might be made.
 - b. Share personal feelings regarding the experience.
 - c. Ask the question, "Did the experience trigger any personal experience regarding the death of a relative or close friend."



PREPARATION FOR THE NOTIFICATION

NOTE: Be careful not to allow the names and addresses of the survivors or the deceased be announced on the police radio. Many people routinely scan the police radio and could easily contact the survivors before the death notification team has a chance to meet with them.

Standing at the door of a survivor is not the place or time to prepare to deliver news that will be remembered for a lifetime. Preparation is critical.

A. Get the Facts:

1. Establish that positive identification of the deceased has been made.
 - a. Full name
 - b. Social Security number
 - c. Date of birth
 - d. Relationship to the next of kin (spouse, parent, child)
 - e. Any health conditions of the next of kin
 - f. Other people who may be in the house (children, parents). When there are more people in the house, there will be a need for a greater number of team members.
 1. This is often hard to determine before the team arrives.
 2. The team may consider having a contingency plan or backup team ready.

B. STEPS TO PREPARE FOR "IN PERSON" DEATH NOTIFICATION (SPO #2)

1. **Know the critical details and circumstances surrounding the death.**
 - a. **Time and place of death**
 - b. **Cause of death**
 - c. **Location of the victim's personal belongings**
2. **It is best that only one person speak initially to the survivors. Prior to arriving at the location, determine who will speak.**
3. **Provide contact information and telephone numbers of services to help the survivors. This may include clergy, funeral homes in the area social services and support groups.**



4. **Know how to access immediate medical or mental health care should family members experience a crisis reaction beyond your response capabilities.**
5. **Provide the survivor with the location of the deceased and how and when the body will be released and transported to a funeral home. Be prepared to furnish the telephone number of where the body is located.**
6. **Inform the survivors if there will be a delay in releasing the deceased. Some reasons for a delay may be:**
 - a. Remote location of the incident
 - b. Impending autopsy (time and place)
 - c. Coroners availability for autopsy if ordered
 - d. Multiple fatalities
 - e. On-going investigation
 - f. Difficult or in-conclusive identification of deceased
7. **Provide information on where and when to identify the deceased, if required.**
8. **Take a cell phone to make emergency phone calls, if required. Leave ringer on “silent” or “vibrate.”**
9. **Take literature regarding grief and support services to provide to survivors.**
10. **Do not take any possessions of the victim to the notification.**
11. **Prior to contacting the next of kin, talk about your own reaction to the death so you may better focus on the next of kin upon arrival.**
12. **Practice how you plan to inform the survivors. Never say “expired”, “he/she is gone”, “no longer with us”, “we have lost”, or “passed away”. Use the words “died” and “dead.” Refer to the victim by using the victim’s name. Don’t say, “body”, or “the deceased.” Remember, the words you use and the manner in which you use those words will remain with the survivors the rest of their lives.**
13. **Be prepared to answer the question, “What do I do now?”**
14. **Be aware of your appearance. Were you at the scene of the incident? Are your clothes covered in blood? It may be best for you to change clothes before making the notification. If possible wear a uniform. It can denote respect for the deceased.**



15. **Understand the difference between grief and mourning. Grief is the pain and mourning is how we express it. Mourning is not an illness to be avoided or overcome. Mourning is a process that survivors must go through to accept the death and re-engage in life.**
16. **Remember, the moment the survivor(s) see you, everything changes for them forever. The survivors' faith and philosophy on life may forever be changed.**

C. Needs of the survivors:

1. Just like crime victims, the survivors need to tell their story over and over again.
2. They need to have feelings accepted and validated.
3. They need to ventilate their emotions.
4. They may need the calm reassurance from an authoritative figure such as a peace officer.
5. They need to know what happened and what to expect next.



NOTIFICATION

A. DEATH NOTIFICATION PROCESS FOR “IN PERSON” AT HOME AND WORK (SPO # 3)

1. In Person at home:

- a. If notification must be made at an inconvenient time (early or late in a day), **the team should call ahead** or have the dispatcher call to notify the family and let them know you are coming. Coordinate the call with the arrival of the notifiers so that they happen as simultaneously as possible. Identify the team members and be sure you are at the correct address.
- b. Present your credentials and **introduce yourself**. Assist the family in verifying your credentials such as providing them the telephone number of the dispatcher.
- c. **Be directive not suggestive**, say, “May we come in?” “You may need to sit down.”
- d. Ask the person if there is anyone else in the house and have them join you (not if it is a young child).
- e. Remember to speak slowly and softly. This is a lot for the emotionally charged survivor to absorb. Remember that your words, tone of voice, facial expressions and attitude will forever remain in the memory of the survivors.
- f. Use the victim’s name. Say, “Are you the parents/wife/husband, etc. of _____?”
- g. Inform simply and directly with warmth and compassion.
- h. Use clear direct and simple terms.
- i. **Prepare the survivors** by saying, “I am afraid that I have some very bad news for you.” Pause to allow the person to brace himself/herself.
- j. **Then follow with, “Deceased’s name has been involved in an accident (or whatever) and has died.” Pause again.**
- k. Say, “I am very sorry.” It is very important to offer your condolences.
- l. No matter what, do not blame the victim for what happened, even if he/she was partially or even fully at fault.
- m. **Ask the survivors how you can help them.** Suggest that you might be able to help them by making phone calls to:
 1. Employer (their own employer and employer of deceased)



2. Clergy
 3. Social services (crime victim advocates can help)
 4. Relatives
 5. Friends
 6. Make a written list of people you called and provide the list to the survivor. Also, offer to help arrange for day care or elder care if required.
- n. **Do not leave survivors alone.** Assist them in helping arrange for a friend, pastor, relative, etc. to be with them before leaving.
 - o. Don't hug the survivors but let them hug you.
 - p. Allow them to talk while you listen. Sometimes the best technique is to say nothing at all. They can see you care by listening to them.
 - q. **If the survivors ask a question to which you don't know the answer, say so and offer to get an answer to them.** Do not speculate or offer an opinion. If your answer is wrong, it could cause even more grief.
 - r. **If there is any option or need for the survivors to view the body of the deceased, inform the survivors of the process.**
 - s. Be available to transport the survivors or a representative of the survivors for identification of the deceased. Be sure to explain the condition of the body prior to arrival. Be careful how you explain the condition. Allow the survivors a chance to change their minds about viewing the deceased after you explain the condition of the body.
 - t. **Leave your business card and assure them that they may call you if they have any questions.** If you are not available, leave the number of a colleague who might be able to help them. Be sure to let the other person know that the survivors may call him/her.
 - u. Ask them if they would mind if you called them the next day. If they would like for you to call them the next day, be sure to make the call. Before leaving, offer your condolences again. Showing compassion or emotion is OK. It is good for the family to see that you care.
 - v. If there was substantial time between the time of the death and the death notification, explain why. If the reason was to ensure factual information and verification, state that to the family. Survivors appreciate efforts to be accurate.



- w. If some information must be withheld from the family, explain why. Provide them with a time frame under which you might be able to inform them of the details that are being withheld.
- x. Do not make any promises to the survivors. Avoid statements such as “we’ll take care of everything,” “we’ll get the person who did this”, “you will be able to see him right away.” These types of promises, that seem to offer momentary comfort, can end up hurting the family even more if they don’t materialize.
- y. If possible and seemingly appropriate, attend the funeral.

Group Discussion: There has been a horrible accident on the freeway. It is 2 a.m. One victim has been pronounced dead at the scene. You have been selected to notify the next of kin. What steps would you take?

2. **In Person at the workplace:**

- a. **Ask to speak to the supervisor or manager and ask if the survivor is available. Do not divulge any details regarding your presence. Ask the manager/supervisor to arrange a private room.** If supervisor/manager is not available, ask for someone in Human Resources.
- b. Ask the supervisor/manager to get the survivor and ask the supervisor/manager say only that someone is waiting to speak with him/her.
- c. Stand when the survivor enters the room. **Identify yourselves (follow procedures under “in person at home”).**
- d. Let the survivors determine what he/she wishes to tell the people in the workplace. **Offer to speak to the employer on behalf of the survivor.**
- e. **Be prepared to transport the survivor** to the morgue, hospital, friend’s, relative’s house or to his/her own home.
- f. If supervisor or HR offers to be in the room, gracefully decline. We are not aware of what the survivor’s relationship is with those parties. It may not be a positive one.

3. **In Person at hospital:**

- a. Arrange for the use of a quiet room.
- b. Arrange for medical personnel to be available to answer any questions.
- c. Gather the family and take them to the room. Identify yourself.
- d. Be directive and say to them, “You need to sit down.”



- e. Ask the people you are talking to their relationship to the victim.
 - f. Ask the family what they know about the patient's condition. Ask, "what have the doctor's told you about _____'s condition?" Provide some time for them to answer.
 - g. Provide a warning, say, "I am afraid I have some bad news" (follow procedure under, "in person at home").
 - h. Ask the survivors if they wish to spend time with their loved one. Stay near by in case there is any problem (medical, security, etc).
 - i. If identification of the deceased is necessary, explain procedures.
 - j. If necessary, explain about an autopsy.
 - k. Be prepared to take the family members home, to a relative's home or to a friend's home.
4. By Telephone (in those very rare instances when in person is not practical).
- a. Before using the telephone to make the notification, be sure there is no other way, including having a counterpart of yours (another peace officer, police chief, victim advocate, etc) in another state make a personal visit to the family. If speaking on the phone to someone, ask them to sit down.
 - b. If you must use the telephone to make the death notification, arrange for professional personnel (victim advocate, clergy, law enforcement, physician) to be available by phone when the survivor receives the call.



WHAT NOT TO SAY/WHAT NOT TO DO

A. PHRASES THAT SHOULD NOT BE SAID TO SURVIVORS (SPO # 4)

1. Religious beliefs
 - a. **Do not discuss religious beliefs**
 - b. Do not say:
 1. "It was God's will" or...
 2. "God won't give you more than you can handle" or...
 3. "She is in a better place now" or...
 4. "Only the good die young" or...
 5. "God must have needed him more than you did."
 - c. If the survivors ask you where you believe the victim is (as being in heaven), use comforting gestures but don't discuss religion. Say in a comforting manner, "I am sure there are others much better qualified than me to answer that for you. Would you like for me to contact your pastor?"
2. **Well intended remarks that don't help.** Don't say:
 - a. "She led a full life" or...
 - b. "I understand what you are going through" or...
 - c. "You will get over this" or...
 - d. "Time heals all wounds" or...
 - e. "It was the best way to go" or...
 - f. "You don't need to know that" or...
 - g. "What you don't know won't hurt you."
3. **Don't make promises that you can't keep.** Don't say:
 - a. "Eventually everything will be okay" or...
 - b. "We'll take care of everything for you."



4. **Don't expect the survivors to be strong.** Don't say:
 - a. "You have to be strong for the kids" or...
 - b. "You have to expect things like this to happen" or...
 - c. "You will be much better next week" or...
 - d. "You will just have to get over this."

B. Don't take any personal belongings of the deceased with you.

1. Arrange a later time for the survivors to receive the personal possessions.
2. Pack the personal belongings in a respectful manner.
3. Do not put them in a bag (especially a trash bag) or an evidence container.

C. Don't make any judgment on the reactions of the survivors. People will deal with the notice in their own way.

Group Discussion: Discuss why each of the above statements should not be made to the survivors.

Group Discussion: What are some helpful phrases for the notifier to say to the survivors?



WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE SURVIVORS AT THE TIME OF THE NOTIFICATION

A. COMMON REACTIONS OF SURVIVORS AT THE TIME OF NOTIFICATION (SPO # 5)

1. Notification is a life defining moment etched in the survivor's memory as a "recurring indelible imprint."
2. The unexpected death of a loved one often disrupts the survivor's entire value system. Reactions include:
 - a. **Rage**
 - b. **Confusion**
 - c. **Guilt**
 - d. **Fear**
 - e. **Powerlessness, helplessness, vulnerability**

Group discussion: Discuss some of the problems and responses law enforcement officers may face in making death notifications.

B. Be prepared for a wide range of emotions and reactions on the part of the survivor. Reactions may include:

1. **Laughter**
2. **Sudden seemingly odd or inappropriate activity**
3. **Physiological reactions**
 - a. Fainting
 - b. Hysteria
 - c. Heart attacks
 - d. Stroke
 - e. Mental breakdowns
4. **Denial**



5. Seeming indifference

C. MEDICAL EMERGENCIES AND SUGGESTED RESPONSES (SPO #6):

1. **Shock**- A person receiving such devastating news may go into shock. Shock is a life-threatening condition that occurs when blood flow to vital areas of the body is restricted. This condition can be caused by physical or emotional trauma. This can rapidly damage multiple organs.

a. Symptoms of Shock:

1. Extremely low blood pressure
2. Fast but weak pulse
3. May include one or more of the following:
 - a. Dizziness, faintness, light-headedness
 - b. Feeling weak or nauseous
 - c. Pale, cool, clammy skin
 - d. Profuse sweating, moist skin
 - e. Unconsciousness
 - f. Rapid, shallow breathing
 - g. Chest pain
 - h. Bluish lips and fingernails

b. What to do:

1. **Call for immediate medical help**
2. **Check the person's airway for breathing**
3. **Have the person lay down on his/her back**
4. **Elevate the legs about 12 inches**
5. **Do not give anything by mouth including food or water**
6. **Cover the person with a blanket**
7. If necessary and you are trained, start CPR



2. **Heart Attack** – The emotional and shocking news of a death can cause a heart attack or symptoms indicating a heart attack.

a. Symptoms of a heart attack:

1. Chest pains and/or squeezing sensation in chest
2. Shortness of breath
3. Jaw pain
4. Severe sweating
5. Arm pain (commonly the left arm)
6. Upper back pain
7. Nausea/vomiting

b. **What to do:**

1. **Call for immediate medical help**
2. **Try to keep the person calm**
3. **Have the person sit down or lie down (whichever is more comfortable)**
4. **Keep the person talking by asking about any medication they are currently taking, over the counter medication, or known allergies (including environmental, food, bee sting).**
5. **If person wants an aspirin allow them to have it**
6. **Ask the person when he/she last ate and what he/she ate**
7. **Cover the person with a blanket**
8. **If person is not breathing and there is no carotid pulse, start CPR if trained**
9. **Use AED equipment if available and trained**
10. **Wait for EMS personnel.** Other than in extreme circumstances, do not transport in a vehicle not EMS-equipped to treat a cardiac arrest patient.



3. **Stroke** – Less likely to occur but still a life threatening occurrence is a stroke.
 - a. Symptoms of a stroke:
 1. Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
 2. Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
 3. Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
 4. Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance
 5. Sudden severe headache with no apparent cause
 - b. **What to do:**
 1. **Call for emergency medical help (indicate you suspect a stroke)**
 2. **Note time of first symptoms and relay such to EMS**
 3. **Keep the person calm**
 4. **Cover the person with a blanket**
 5. **Do not give anything by mouth**
 6. **Ask the person about medication he/she is taking and last time the medicine was taken**
 7. **Ask about over the counter medicine**

D. Physical Attacks

1. Make notification at an arms length from the survivor. Body language can be sensitive and attentive while still maintaining a safe distance during notification.
2. It is possible for the reaction of the survivors to include attacking the notifier. As long as there is no danger to the survivor or to another person present including the notifier, allow the person to vent. One police officer reported that the wife of the victim repeatedly pounded on him upon hearing the news that her husband had been killed. The survivor may only be expressing anger. Do not feel that this is a personal attack.
3. Be familiar with some de-escalation strategies if a survivor attempts to harm him/herself or others.
4. Be cognizant of objects (such as kitchen knives, baseball bats, etc) that could be used as a weapon.



- E. Severe Denial – Denial is a reaction that some people exhibit upon hearing the news that a loved one has died. The survivor may say, “You must be wrong, he was just here” or “someone else must have been driving his car, he is always loaning it out to someone.” This is when your death notification preparation will be needed. How do you know who the victim was? Calmly and with great compassion tell the survivor who established the identity and how identity was confirmed. If denial continues, viewing of the victim by the survivor(s) may be suggested. If the survivors wish to view the deceased, be sure to prepare the survivors for what they might see. If at all possible, clean the body before it is viewed. Bear in mind the need for an autopsy and evidence collection from the body before and viewing.

- F. Dazed withdrawal/inability to grasp the situation – This situation will be difficult to properly handle as the survivor has withdrawn and is not, therefore, communicating with you. Your victim advocate, clergy or counselor may best be able to assist you. Also, other family members, neighbors or friends may be able to help.



FACTORS THAT CAN COMPOUND GRIEF

NOTE: In a natural death or in a prolonged illness resulting in death, the family has an opportunity to better prepare for and adjust to life without the loved one. There is anticipatory grieving before the death actually occurs. In a sudden death, there is no time to plan for a life without the loved one. As hard as that adjustment may be, it can be even harder under some of the following conditions:

A. **FACTORS THAT OFTEN COMPOUND THE GRIEVING PROCESS FOR THE FAMILY (SPO # 7)**

1. **The family is prohibited from viewing the body.**

- a. Be prepared to fully explain to the survivors the reason for the prohibition and when they may be able to view the body.
- b. Remember, when the family has no choice, the family feels out of control. The family may feel “victimized” as a result of not being able to view the body.

2. **The lack of a body.**

- a. This may lead to false hope that the person is not dead. Be prepared to fully explain why you believe the victim is dead. The survivors probably will not have closure until they have concrete evidence that the loved one is really dead.
- b. You may be asking them to accept something which they don't want to accept even with a body, now without one they really won't accept it.

3. **Lack of knowledge surrounding the death.**

- a. Survivors want and need to know the details of the death. The details help them accept the death. A dramatic event has happened yet they cannot know why or how, or perhaps even when and where. Assure the family that they will be provided details as soon as they become available.
- b. Obtain the name of the person the family would like to have as a point of contact for the family. If the family appears to be divided, there may need to be two people to be points of contact.
- c. Periodically, contact the family even if no further details are available to assure them that details of the death are being sought.



4. **Lack of positive confirmation of death such as:**

- a. **A missing person** – The family can't grieve that which in their collective mind has not happened. A missing person often does not equate to a death. There is always the possibility (media coverage often compounds this possibility) that the person will be found alive. The family will cling to even the smallest hope that the loved one will return. Don't expect the family to embrace the idea that the loved one is presumed dead. To the family, it is a missing person or perhaps even a misplaced person. Keep the family informed as much as possible. If it is reasonable, allow the family to help in locating the person, ie; handout flyers, search the area, talk to the news media. This keeps them busy, allows for them to make some decisions (thus achieving some control over the situation), and allows them to contribute to the effort to find their loved one.
- b. **Events involving numerous victims;** multi-vehicle accidents, airplane crashes, train wrecks, natural disasters or an incident like a mass school shooting. In the early stages of such events, families will not know whether relatives are among the victims. Until they know for sure, there can be no closure and the grieving process cannot start. If possible separate the families from other onlookers. The families can help each other. Prepare the families for what may be the inevitable. Keep them informed. Ask for the family to identify a family member to be your contact person for communication purposes. Assure the family that you will give them any and all information as it becomes available to you. Don't speak to the media about a specific victim without either informing the family or seeking permission.

5. **Multiple deaths in a family** – Notifying a person(s) of multiple deaths in one family compounds the effect and potential reactions. It may be beneficial to have more than a two person team do the death notification. A team consisting of multiple pastoral members, medical, law enforcement personnel, victim advocates and counselors may be helpful.

6. **Family members assume blame:**

- a. One or more of the family members may blame themselves for the death of a loved one and believe, "If only I hadn't done. . . then he would still be here with me." Take the case of the father of a 16 year old who in the interest of letting his teenager gain driving experience asked his son to drive him to the store. The son pulled out in front of another vehicle and was killed. The father was devastated. During the intensity of the pain, the mother blamed the father. The original grief was compounded by the effort to place blame.
- b. What can the death notification team do?
 1. Listen
 2. Hear the pain
 3. Don't pass judgment and don't take sides.



4. The family needs help so be prepared by having counseling information available to them.
 5. When you call or visit this family again, be prepared to furnish the same information again (they may not have been in the frame of mind to hear it the first time).
 6. Be prepared to provide them with an appropriate list of support groups
- 7. Financial considerations:**
- a. A sudden death, particularly that of the primary wage earner, may leave a family in a severe financial crisis. Not only must they suddenly prepare for a life without the loved one but also without perhaps immediate funds to purchase emergency family needs such as food, medicines, clothing or funeral expenses.
 - b. Suggestions include:
 1. Community help may be available to the family.
 2. Local counselors and pastors often have some knowledge of emergency funds.
 3. Ask the family if you can share their situation with others in the community but do not make any promises.
 4. If you believe that the situation surrounding the death would qualify for assistance through programs administered by the Attorney General's victim services section, provide the family with information on obtaining assistance.



SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

- A. When it is a police officer's family member – Unfortunately there will be times that it will be necessary to inform an officer of a death in his/her family. A well thought-out plan to deal with this situation can help ease the pain and not cause an escalation of the trauma associated with death notification. A well thought out plan should include:
1. Identifying two or three individuals in management that would be appropriate to make the notification. Once a determination has been made, be sure to update the list as needed.
 2. Be aware of social services available to the employee such as:
 - a. Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 - b. Counseling services
 - c. Peer support groups
 - d. Pastoral services
 - e. Psychologists
 3. Provide transportation for the next of kin if needed
 4. Determine the best location for this type of communication. A quiet and secluded room is a good option.
 5. Consider operational needs when coverage is light. May need to call in extra personnel to cover the shift if the officer is on duty at time of death.
 6. Be prepared for the response of the officer (survivor)
 - a. Will the officer demand to go to a scene of a relative's death?
 - b. Will there be an investigation which may need to be completed by another agency?
 7. Determine what other agencies or departments need to be informed of the death:
 - a. Social Security office
 - b. Human Resources for life insurance coverage
 - c. Union representatives for possible death benefits, etc.



B. Suicide of an officer

1. Suicide is not uncommon in the law enforcement community
 - a. It is an intense individual choice
 - b. Signs/Indications
 1. Sometimes no sign and very sudden
 2. Signs/indications are often realized after the fact
2. Survivors may have intense feelings of guilt. Help the family understand that they are not at fault.
3. Suicide may be embarrassing to the family. Help guard the family's privacy.
4. Let the family know that recovery takes time
 - a. Provide assistance
 1. Counseling
 2. Financial
 3. Legal
 4. Pastoral if appropriate



EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN

A. Explaining a Death to a Child

1. A family devastated by the death of a loved one may need help informing children of the death.
 - a. The family may request that you tell the children or that the children are present when next of kin are told.
 - b. Talking with children about death is different than talking with adults.
2. Talking to children about death usually is a process that takes place over an extended period of time and is contingent on the age and maturity level of the child.
 - a. Children will ask questions only when they are ready for the answers.
 - b. Do not make assumptions about the child's understanding about death.
 - c. Words to use to explain what has happened will depend upon the age of the child.
 - d. Words such as homicide, suicide or murder may be too much for a child to grasp. However, the child may understand killed or died.
 - e. The child needs to be told in a straightforward manner with great compassion. Terms such as "passed away" or "gone" should be avoided. They are euphemisms that create magical thinking in children.
 - f. Identify the relationship of the deceased to the child.
 - g. If at all possible, seek assistance from a victim advocate trained in explaining death to children.
3. A child's reaction to the death
 - a. The child may hear what you are saying and perhaps even comprehend it but not realize the effect of the death on him/her.
 - b. The child may say something seemingly inappropriate, walk away from you or become angry at you. This may be the child's way of processing what you are saying.



B. METHODS OF EXPLAINING A DEATH TO A CHILD (SPO #8)

1. **When talking with a child, have another adult present and make sure the child feels safe.**
 - a. **Get down to the child's level and use the child's name.**
 - b. **Tell the child that you have something "sad" to tell him/her.**
 - c. **Use small words you believe the child has heard before.** For example, say to the child, "My name is _____ and I am a police officer for the _____."
 - d. **Continue to explain to the child, based upon what you believe they can understand, what has occurred.**
 - e. **Professionals recommend a direct approach without any euphemisms. Use short factual statements.**
2. **You might have to explain what "dead" really means.**
 - a. Keep in mind that death to a child may mean something different.
 - b. Children are repeatedly exposed to death in cartoons but yet see the cartoon characters suddenly spring to life after being run over by a car for example.
3. **Details of the event should wait until the child asks for more information.**
 - a. You can inform the family that professionals recommend that children four years and older can comprehend the death and should attend the funeral if they desire. They should not be forced to attend.
 - b. If possible, recommend that the person leading the service keep at least a portion of the service simple enough for children to understand or allow for a special presentation for the children.
4. If you are able to follow up with this family, you might remind them that children can place something in the casket. Something as simple as a paper that the child drew or wrote may be important for the child to know that the person has with them.
5. If there is a need for the child to have a different person care for him/her, explain this to the child.
 - a. Ask the child if they have any questions. Keep in mind that you may need to repeat the same information many times.



- b. Explain to the child what might occur such as a need to go to the hospital, stay with another relative, attend a funeral, the involvement of peace officers and who will be taking care of them.
 - c. As with adults, children need to know what will happen next and have a choice, when possible, in the events.
6. Explain to the parent(s) and/or caregiver that children may suffer some regression and may need some special attention to get through a trauma. Emphasize that the children will need their feelings validated much like adults need their feelings and emotions validated.
7. Children need to know that someone will take care of them. Speak to the children in terms of the future and address their concerns about what will happen next.



FOLLOW-UP WITH THE FAMILY

A. WAYS THE NOTIFIER CAN ASSIST THE SURVIVORS AFTER THE INITIAL NOTIFICATION (SPO # 9)

1. You have possibly delivered to the family the worse news they will ever hear. Each word you have said and the manner in which it was said will always remain with the loved one. **One way to help the family is with a good follow-up.**
 - a. The follow-up is the last step and your last chance to present a sensitive caring death notification.
 - b. Simple things can be done which will mean a lot to the family.
2. After notification, **help build a support system for the family** including:
 - a. Relatives
 - b. Friends
 - c. Neighbors
 - d. Clergy
 - e. Victim advocate
3. **Leave a telephone number where you can be reached if they have questions, concerns or needs.**
 - a. Ask if you can call or visit them the next day, then do it.
 - b. If you are not available to follow-up the next day, provide the name of someone who would be available should they have any questions or concerns.
 - c. When you speak to them again, ask if you can be of any help or answer any questions.
 - d. If at all possible and it seems appropriate, attend the funeral, wake, or memorial service of the victim.
 - e. **Always fulfill any commitment that you have made to the family.** Not doing what you promised to do for the family can make them feel abandoned in the process.
4. **When it is appropriate, ask the next of kin when they would like to receive the personal affects of their loved one.**



- a. Respect their wishes.
 - b. When you provide the personal belongings, be sure they are presented in a professional manner.
 - c. Do not deliver the belongings in a bag but rather neatly placed in a clean plain box.
 - d. You may want to prepare the next of kin if the site of the belongings could be upsetting to them.
 - e. Explain what is in the box so they can make a decision when or if to open the box.
5. **Follow-up again in about a week and then monthly for a while.**
- a. Each time ask them how they are doing and if you can be of assistance to them.
 - b. Continue to offer resources such as counseling services or victim advocates which might be helpful to them.
6. **Encourage the survivors to participate in activities in which that they would had previously been included.** These activities may include:
- a. Organizations to which the victim belonged
 - b. Family reunions of the victim
 - c. Community gatherings or charity events
7. **Be aware of bereavement support groups in the area and let the family know where they can meet with people who have similar experiences. Provide literature on other support groups such as MADD and Families of Murdered Children or similar groups, if appropriate.**



PROTECT YOURSELF

METHODS FOR THE NOTIFIER TO MANAGE POST NOTIFICATION STRESS (SPO # 10)

People who deliver death notifications whether it be a peace officer, victim advocate, clergy, physician or others are prone to stress related problems. This very sensitive event can be very emotional and could strain even the most seasoned officer.

In addition to the stress and emotions tied to the specific death notification, the notifier may also experience emotions and stress related to his/her own loss of a loved one. Be aware of the possibility that your own loss can be intensified and you can experience some of the same physical, emotional and cognitive reactions as the survivors you have been assigned to assist.

- A. To manage what could be post notification stress, professionals recommend:
1. **Seek balance to offset stress** – whether it be using exercise, a hobby or music, or another form of entertainment, have something to work at to reduce the stress of the death notification.
 2. **Use stress prevention methods** such as: deep breathing relaxation training and anxiety self-monitoring techniques.
 3. **Avoid isolation and alcohol as a means of coping**
 4. **Identify positive aspects of your position**
 5. **Identify and consult with your support system**
 - a. Other death notifiers
 - b. Health care professionals
 - c. Employee Assistance personnel
 - d. Counselors
 - e. Clergy
 6. **Use humor, when appropriate, to offset stress**
 7. **The notification team should share personal feelings and emotions.** Be frank and honest about your feelings. Don't try to carry the emotional pain all by yourself.



B. As soon as reasonably possible, de-brief each death notification. What happened, what went right, what went wrong, how could it be improved upon and how you personally felt about the situation? Ask yourself and discuss with your support system:

1. How you feel?
2. What emotions did you experience?
3. What identification did you make with the survivors? (Your own family)



COURSE SUMMARY

It is absolutely imperative that a death notification be done with the highest levels of compassion and professionalism. What is said, how it is said, mannerisms, expressions and virtually everything surrounding the notification will be etched into the memory of the survivors. A notification done correctly with a compassionate follow-through with the survivors, can put the survivors on the road of recovery, reduce grief intensity and allow survivors to re-engage in life. If done wrong, it will be vividly remembered with pain and anger.

The notifier should expect anything and everything from the survivors and be prepared to respond to both mental and physical reactions including shock, heart attack or stroke.

The notifier needs to express sympathy, be direct and listen to the survivors. Always extend condolences and say you are sorry for what has happened. Treat each death notification as if it was your first. Stay as long as necessary to ensure that the survivors have a support system in place.

There are some factors that can compound grief including lack of the body of the deceased, lack of knowledge surrounding the death, lack of positive confirmation of the death, family not permitted to view the body, severe financial loss, suicide, family member assigns blame and multiple deaths in a family.

Children may react to a death differently than adults. Children will process the concept of the death over a longer period of time. With great compassion and in a firm and straightforward manner, inform the children of the death using the terms died, dead or was killed. Some children may have a difficult time comprehending the meaning of death. Address safety issues with children as well as what the child(ren) may expect next. Assure the children that someone will take good care of them. If available, include Victim Advocates in the process.

There are many small things that a death notification team can do to help the family. Attend the funeral if at all possible, offer condolences, ask them how you can help, encourage use of bereavement support groups and be available just to listen to the survivors.

Protect yourself from emotional trauma by having your own support group, debrief the notification event, examine personal reactions to the death, and seek balance in your life to offset the stress.



HANDOUT #1 – LISTENING SKILLS

“Listening is an intellectual and emotional process that integrates physical, emotional and intellectual inputs in a search for meaning and understanding. The focus is on the entirety of each person’s being, not just on words.” (“Effective Listening” NOVA Training Guide, 1987)

Don’t jump to conclusions. Don’t listen to the beginning of a sentence and try to fill in the rest.

Remain relaxed but attentive. Don’t become tense or you’ll make any distractions more pronounced.

Remember that you can think about four times faster than someone can talk. This means that your thoughts will race ahead of the speaker’s words and you can become so detached that you’ll have a hard time catching up with what was said. Use the extra time to summarize in your head what the speaker is saying.

Work at listening. Try to listen alertly and enthusiastically. Respond to the speaker by giving feedback.

Look at the person who is speaking.

Repeat some of the things the speaker says.

Don’t rush the speaker.

Keep your personal values, beliefs, biases and judgments to yourself.

Don’t interrupt.

Summarize what the speaker has said.

Validate the survivor’s feelings if at all possible.

Ask questions only to facilitate the flow of the story and to clarify.

Instill peace through silence by waiting for survivors to decide when they may want to continue their stories.

If you cannot improve on silence, then don’t.



QUESTIONS

1. Describe the Model Notification Team.
2. List some information you should know before performing a death notification.
3. Why should at least two people be included in the notification team?
4. If it is the middle of the night and you have reason to believe the survivors are asleep, describe what you would do.
5. When should you deliver the personal affects of the victim to the survivors?
6. Summarize the long-term affects that your choice of words, attitude and demeanor can have on the survivors.
7. Describe the symptoms of shock.
8. If you suspect a person has gone into shock, what should you do?
9. Describe the symptoms of a heart attack.
10. If you suspect a person is having a heart attack, what should you do?
11. What are the symptoms of a stroke?
12. What would you do if you suspect a person of having a stroke?
13. If there is no information on the circumstances surrounding the death, what should you tell the survivors?
14. Describe how children process a death notification in comparison to an adult.
15. What are concerns children may have that an adult may not have and how would you address those concerns with a child?
16. Name several things you can do as part of a follow-up to assist the family.
17. What is the difference between grief and mourning?
18. Describe the needs of the survivors.



19. What should you do if you are attacked by a survivor after giving them the news of the death of a loved one?
20. Describe some things a death notifier should to do to help him/herself.



QUESTION/ANSWER KEY

1. Describe the Model Notification Team.

The model notification team should consist of at least one male and one female. They should drive separate vehicles but arrive together. One member of the team should be trained in recognizing symptoms of life threatening conditions and first aid for such.

2. List some information you should know before performing a death notification.

Know critical details and circumstances surrounding the death, time and place of death, cause of death, and location of the victim's personal belongings, who made positive identification, who is the next of kin.

3. Why should at least two people be included in the notification team?

It allows one member to stay with the survivors if one of the survivors must go to the hospital and/or receive immediate medical care. It is protection for the notifier if one is attacked by a survivor, and the notifiers may need to comfort each other.

4. If it is the middle of the night and you have reason to believe the survivors are asleep, describe what you would do.

Either call the home yourself or ask the dispatcher to call the home and wake the survivors up. Tell the survivors to open the door for peace officers. Shine your flashlight on your batch and/or credentials and assist survivors in verifying your identity.

5. When should you deliver the personal affects of the victim to the survivors?

You should deliver the personal affects of the victim when the survivors have indicated that they want to receive them. They should be delivered in a plain box.



6. Summarize the long-term affects that your choice of words, attitude and demeanor can have on the survivors.

The survivors will forever remember everything about the moment they suspect and then hear that a loved one has died. The words you use will be played over and over again in the minds of the survivors. It can be remembered as a moment of great compassion or remembered with great anger. Done with great compassion it can start the mourning process and healing can begin.

7. Describe the symptoms of shock.

- *Extremely low blood pressure*
- *Fast weak pulse*
- *Dizziness, light-headedness, faintness*
- *Pale, cool, clammy skin*
- *Profuse sweating, moist skin*
- *Unconsciousness*
- *Rapid, shallow breathing*
- *Chest pain*
- *Bluish lips and fingernails*

8. If you suspect a person has gone into shock, what should you do?

- *Call for emergency help.*
- *Check the person's airway for breathing, circulation*
- *If necessary start CPR*
- *Have a person lay down on his/her back*
- *Elevate the legs about 12 inches*
- *Do not give anything by mouth including food or water*
- *Cover with blanket*

9. Describe the symptoms of a heart attack.

- *Chest pains and/or squeezing sensation in chest*
- *Shortness of breathe*
- *Jaw pain*
- *Severe sweating*
- *Arm pain (commonly the left arm)*
- *Upper back pain*
- *Nausea/vomiting*



10. If you suspect a person is having a heart attack, what should you do?
- *Try to keep the person calm*
 - *Have the person sit down or lie down (whichever is more comfortable)*
 - *Keep the person talking by asking about any medication they are currently taking, over the counter medication, or known allergies (including environmental, food, bee sting)*
 - *If person wants an aspirin allow them to have it*
 - *Ask the person when he/she last ate and what he/she ate*
 - *Cover the person with a blanket*
 - *If person is not breathing and there is no carotid pulse, start CPR*
 - *If available, use on AED*
 - *It is best not to attempt to transport the person as the person could go into cardiac arrest without means of treating the issue*
11. What are the symptoms of a stroke?
- *Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body*
 - *Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding*
 - *Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes*
 - *Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance*
 - *Sudden severe headache with no known cause*
12. What would you do if you suspect a person of having a stroke?
- *Call for emergency medical help (indicate you suspect a stroke)*
 - *Note time of first symptoms and relay such to EMS*
 - *Keep the person calm*
 - *Cover the person with a blanket*
 - *Do not give anything by mouth*
 - *Ask the person about medication he/she is taking and last time the medicine was taken*
 - *Ask about over the counter medicine the person may be taking*



13. If there is no information on the circumstances surrounding the death, what should you tell the survivors?

Assure the family that you will provide them any details as soon as they become available to you. Ask the family to name a person they would like to be the point of contact for information. Periodically, contact the family even when you don't have any news just to assure them that you are still working on obtaining information regarding the death.

14. Describe how children process a death notification versus an adult.

Talking to children about death is a process which takes place over an extended period of time. Children will ask questions only when they are ready for an answer. Adults want and need all the information right away.

15. What are concerns children may have that an adult may not have and how would you address those concerns with a child?

Children need to know how the death will affect them, assurance of their safety, and what the future holds for them (who might they live with).

16. Name several things you can do as part of a follow-up that may assist the family.

Make sure the family has a support team in place, leave a number where they can reach you, attend the funeral, wake or memorial service, contact the family the next day, the next week and monthly for a while. Be prepared to suggest bereavement group.

17. What is the difference between grief and mourning?

Grief is the pain and mourning is how we express it.



18. Describe the needs of the survivors.

- *Just like crime victims, the survivors need to tell their story over and over.*
- *They need to have all feelings accepted and validated.*
- *Survivors need to ventilate their emotions.*
- *Survivors need calm, reassurance from an authoritative figure such as that of a peace officer.*
- *Survivors need to know what happened and what to expect next.*

19. What should you do if you are attacked by a survivor after giving them the news of the death of a loved one?

As long as there is no danger to the survivor or to another person including you, allow the person to vent. Do not take it as a personal attack. The person is probably only expressing anger at what has happened.

20. Describe some things a death notifier should do to help him/herself.

- *Be aware that your own loss can be intensified by the experience of notifying the survivors.*
- *Share your emotions with another notifier, health care professional, counselor, or clergy.*
- *Seek balance to offset stress.*
- *Get plenty of rest.*
- *Get plenty of exercise.*
- *Emphasize the positive aspect of your job.*

