



Communicating the News of a Death

There is no doubt that being the bearer of bad news is an incredibly challenging role. Regardless of your connection to the person who died, it is always difficult to share the news of death. If you had a close relationship with the deceased, trying to balance your own shock and grief while communicating clearly with an autistic loved one can feel overwhelming.

Delivering the News

Communicating with clear and honest language about what has happened in whatever way is most helpful for the individual is the goal. Using words such as “died” instead of euphemisms such as “passed away” will promote clarity and understanding.

Do not expect someone with autism to react to news of death like a neurotypical person. They could appear calm but be having an extreme reaction to the news of the death and may lose their ability to communicate, may not react emotionally, may completely withdraw, or may ignore the information.

Although each individual and situation is unique, some core principles are helpful:

- **Communicate with respect** — Be deliberate and clear with your words, avoiding euphemisms, and balance honesty and explanations with what you know about the person you’re speaking to. Tailor all communication to their comprehension ability. Don’t assume their understanding is childlike.
- **Rely on prior interactions** — What has worked in the past when communicating with the person? Consider your understanding of their needs when assessing the best way to help them cope with this new information about a death. The same is true when communicating about someone’s serious illness.
- **Offer choices for next steps** — Let them choose how to cope with their grieving process. Options should be given for how and when they want to communicate about it; how much they want to know about the circumstances; and choices about participating in the funeral or other rituals.
- **Provide reassurance** — Let them know that they will continue to be validated and supported, and affirm that their bond with the person who has died can continue in ways that may not be clear at the time. Autistics are logical thinkers and this may not make sense, but the connection can continue through behaviors, traditions, and in many other ways.