

## Listening with your heart ... discussing serious news

Gerard S. Brungardt, MD, BeL, FACP, FAAHPM  
Assoc. Professor Internal Medicine UKSM-W  
Medical Director Harry Hynes Memorial Hospice  
[gbrungardt@hynesmemorial.org](mailto:gbrungardt@hynesmemorial.org)

## Listen with your Heart

- Start with the patient's agenda
- Track both the emotional and cognitive
- Stay with the patient and move the conversation forward one step at a time
- Articulate empathy explicitly
- Talk about what you *can* do before you talk about what you *can't* do
- Start with big picture goals before specific medical interventions
- Spend at least a moment giving the patient your complete undivided attention

## Listen with your Heart

“One always meets another person at the  
same level one seeks to know him.”  
Christian de Cherge

## Listen with your Heart

1. Prepare for the discussion
2. Establish what the patient (and family) knows
3. Ask for permission to discuss
4. Deliver the information
5. Respond to emotions
6. Summarize plan/follow-up

von Gunten JAMA "Ensuring Competency ..."  
Back et al Mastering Communication

## Listen with your Heart

- Prepare for the discussion ...
- When to have the discussion ...
  - further treatment futile ... likely to cause more distress than comfort (ie make the 'dx' there is 'nothing more to do')
  - Ask yourself the question "Would I be surprised if this patient dies?"
  - Patient/Family brings up ...
  - During/After hospitalization
  - When/what would you tell your own family/friend? ... a fellow physician?

## Listen with your Heart

- Prepare for the discussion
  - prepare yourself
  - dx/prognosis
    - med-speak ... normal-speak
  - emotions
    - relationship with patient-family
    - medical errors, other baggage
  - role
    - physician ... cure ... heal

### Listen with your Heart

- Prepare for the discussion
  - prep yourself
  - not on the phone
  - sit down
  - quiet place
  - introductions

### Listen with your Heart

- Establish what the patient knows
  - “What is your understanding of what is going on?”
  - “What else is going on?”
  - listen and let them tell their story/concerns

### Listen with your Heart

- Ask for permission to discuss
- “Are you ready to talk about this?”
  - gives them some control
- If unsure about decision maker, cultural, etc ... “How do you and your family want to deal with news that is serious?”

### Listen with your Heart

- Deliver the information
  - clear unambiguous language
  - “I’m afraid I have some serious news...”
  - “I wish ...”
  - “I’m sorry but...”
  - “Unfortunately...”
  - share the ‘core’ news in as few words as possible

### Listen with your Heart

- Deliver the information
  - “I wish there were something we could do to fix your heart.”
  - “But I’m afraid that, there is nothing we can do to cure your heart.”
  - “Let’s talk about what we can do to help care for you.”

### Listen with your Heart

- Deliver the information
  - be quiet
  - let them take the lead
  - do not try to compensate for your own discomfort by talking (or changing the subject) to fill this very uncomfortable space
  - be prepared for emotional reaction

## Listen with your Heart

- Respond to Emotions
  - “This must be hard for you...”
  - “What is going through your mind right now?”
  - “Would you like more information now or should we talk later?”
  - name the emotion
  - (do not say “I know how you feel”)

## Listen with your Heart

“There is nothing so ridiculous as the answer to a question that is not being asked.”

Reinhold Niebuhr

## Listen with your Heart

- Summarize plan/follow-up
  - “What is most important to you right now?”
  - talk about what you *can* do ... before talking about what *can't* be done
  - address their concerns
  - never push your own agenda
  - use time as an ally
  - write down specific follow up plan

## Listen with your Heart

“If you listen carefully to your patients, they will tell you not only what is wrong with them, but also what is wrong with you.”

*Love in the Ruins*

Walker Percy

## Bibliography

- Difficult Conversations. Stone, D. et al Penguin Books. 2000.
- Crucial Conversations. Patterson, K. et al. McGraw Hill. 2002.
- Getting to Yes. Fisher & Ury. Penguin Books. 1991.

## Bibliography

- Ensuring Competency in End of Life Care: Communication and Relational Skills. von Gunten, CF et al. JAMA. December 20, 2000. 284(23):3051-3057.
- Communicating with Seriously Ill Patients: Better Words to Say. Pantilat, Steven. JAMA. March 25, 2009. 301(12): 1279-1281.
- Palliative Care for Patients with Heart Failure. Pantilat, Steven Z. and Steinle, Anthony E. JAMA. May 26, 2004. 291(20): 2476-2482.

## Bibliography

- Dealing With Conflict in Caring for the Seriously Ill. Back, AL and Arnold, RM. JAMA. March 16, 2005. 293(11):1374-1381.
- Setting Goals to Maintain Hope: von Roenn, JH & von Gunten, CF. *Journal of Clinical Oncology*. 21(3):570-74. February 2003.
- Referring a Patient ... at the Close of Life. Teno & Connor. JAMA. 2009;301(6):651-659
- Mastering Communication with Seriously Ill Patients. Back, A. et. al. Cambridge. 2009