

# How to... deliver bad news

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Social workers, *writes Andy O'Beirne*, have to give bad news in a variety of scenarios, from telling parents their children are going to be taken into care to giving news mentally ill people may find disturbing or upsetting. Here are some tips on how to give difficult news in a safe and supportive way.

## **1 Think ahead.**

Consider how the information is likely to affect the individual or family. Should you set aside time to spend with them after breaking the news? Even quite common messages can upset people and you may need to remain with them while they digest it, particularly if they do not have the support of family members. Try to determine whether the person will be OK when you leave, and report any concerns to your manager.

## **2 Safety is paramount.**

Many of the people social workers speak to are vulnerable and some don't have control over their impulses, so they may become aggressive. The most common places of attack are at residential homes or in the client's home. Any situation where bad news is being delivered should be risk assessed and a decision taken on whether it is best to give the news in the office, or during a joint visit.

## **3 Get straight to the point**

As well as being empathetic and sensitive, it is important to use clear and uncomplicated language. Any confusion will only make matters worse. If the news concerns your assessments, make sure you justify the decisions that have been taken. Keep things short, if possible. Remember to listen and remain silent long enough for the other person to think and respond. If you're finding it difficult, count up to 10 seconds in your head.

## **4 Reflect on your approach**

Think about why you break bad news in a certain way. For example, does it bring up issues or feelings from your own life experiences? It is natural to want to avoid your own unease at giving bad news, and each practitioner will be affected differently. Make sure you discuss this in supervision.

## **5 Just do it**

When all the planning, reflection and risk assessment has been done, have the courage of your convictions. Take a deep breath and say it. Social workers have to give people news they don't necessarily want to hear; it's part of the job. But it does become easier with experience.

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