

State of Israel
Ministry of Education
Pedagogical Administration
Senior Department of Psychological and Counseling Services
Unit for Coping with Situations of Crisis, Emergency, and Suicide

Delivering Difficult News for Students in Class During Social Distancing/Remote Learning

Introduction

This briefing deals with delivering difficult news to students when it is not possible to open schools and gather students together. Initially, students should receive such news from their parents, who will receive instructions for doing so¹ (either in a letter or a virtual meeting). In the second stage, shortly after parents deliver the news, there should be a virtual meeting for all students in the class, using a technological platform that allows for as convenient a conversation as possible.²

Goals for the First Meeting With Students (including the entire class):

- ✓ Strengthening the class's sense of "togetherness" as a fortifying factor, focusing on personal and group connections³
- ✓ Structuring the event and providing accurate facts, to avoid the spread of rumors and unreliable information
- ✓ Option for sharing and initial venting
- ✓ Initial mapping of students' needs/situations
- ✓ Forming a basis for intimate, small-group meetings

Applicable Situations

- ✓ Death or serious illness/injury of a student who attends the school
- ✓ Death of a staff member, from COVID-19 or other causes
- ✓ Death of a parent/first-degree relative of a student, from COVID-19 or other causes

Note: Systemic activity in such a case will be conducted at the discretion of the emergency response team, with awareness of the impact of the event on different circles within the school.

The conversation will be led by the classroom teacher, school counselor, or other figure who is significant and close to the students, in coordination with the local educational psychological services. Remember that the students, like all of us, are going through a unique, complex period of uncertainty.

¹ See Appendix I, which includes guiding points for parents.

² See Appendix II, which deals with virtual communication.

³ See Appendix III, which deals with messages that build resilience, give confidence, and serve as an anchor during such conversations.

The virtual meeting with students will take place after the first virtual conversation of the emergency response team with school staff to inform and direct the conversation with students from other classes, as required (see the guide for the first conversation with teachers, link).

Guidelines for the Conversation With Students

Possible opening: “Dear students, we are experiencing a unique and unfamiliar period. We are unable to meet, or must limit the number of people who can attend an event. Even after a difficult event like the one you heard about, we can’t hug each other and be together in the way that we’d like to. However, because we want to experience this as a community, we have come together for this virtual meeting, which will help us cope with the difficult thing that happened ...”

A. Providing factual and reliable information about what happened:

- a. “Unfortunately, I have to share difficult news that some of you may have already heard. Some time ago _____, something sad and painful happened: _____ passed away. Who has heard about this?”

This opening allows for gradual exposure to the event, maintaining continuity and accuracy of information.

- b. Only factual information, provided by a qualified individual acting in an official capacity, should be shared. You can say: “This is the information I know at the moment; anything else is just a rumor.” It is important to distinguish between facts and rumors, and to ensure that up-to-date information is transmitted when it is received.
- c. Do not conceal information. Students will eventually find out, so it is better that they receive information in a responsible and controlled manner, from an educational figure who is meaningful to them.

B. Allowing students to express feelings and thoughts

“What thoughts go through your mind after what you heard?”

“What are you feeling right now?”

It is important to note that after something like this people often feel ... and these feelings become less severe over time

C. Referral to virtual small-group processing sessions

“We will continue the conversation in small groups of about five students. The counselor, another teacher who knows you, or I will meet you for a virtual, small-group conversation, where we can think together about how we can support one another, help one another, and help those who have been harmed.”

Suggestions for Small-Group Conversations

- 1. Establishing emotional connection and defining the purpose of the conversation.** Open with a sentence such as, “I’m sorry that this conversation is taking place in the wake of a painful event. In today’s meeting, we will try to share with each other and strengthen one another.”
- 2. Invitation to express feelings and thoughts:** “Does anyone want to share their thoughts or feelings about the unfortunate/difficult news shared in the class meeting?”
- 3. Connection to resources and effective actions in the context of the event.** Let’s think:
 - “How can I help a friend who has experienced the difficult event?”
 - “What can help us cope right now? Since we can’t attend a funeral or a shiva right now, like we might have done in other times, let’s think of ways to be together and comfort and strengthen one another.”
- 4. The meeting will end with a task that the group will take on, such as:**
 - Creating a video for a friend
 - Daily communication shifts
 - Delivering reinforcing messages each day, with advance planning
 - Planning condolence visits in small groups, in coordination with the family and in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Health
- 5. In conclusion, it’s worth telling the students:** “We will talk again about the event and the tasks we set for ourselves in a few days. At the end of the week, there will be another class-wide meeting, with another opportunity to share with and listen to one another.”

Note: At the end of the sessions, the team that accompanied the groups will meet and present circles of vulnerability that it has identified, as well as individual, group, and class assistance methods.

Appendix I: Guidelines for Parents on Informing Children of Bad News and Talking About It

Due to the current situation, we are unable to meet with the whole class and are therefore asking parents to tell their children what happened and talk to them about it. Please see the following important guidelines:

- 1. Talk to children openly, frankly, and calmly,** in language appropriate to their developmental stage. You could say, for example: “Unfortunately, I found out that ____ died yesterday. It’s very sad for us, and especially for ____ from your class. Have you heard anything about it?”

2. **You can express emotions, but it is important that you do so in a controlled manner.** Exposure to strong emotional turmoil can undermine a child's confidence and cause great anxiety.
3. **Avoid talking over children's heads.** When discussing a difficult subject, we may try to protect children (especially young children) from it, and talk to each other assuming that children don't understand. Remember that partial understanding, as well as hearing a conversation in anxious tones, are harmful. Absorbing nonverbal messages and fragments of conversation can lead children to use their imagination to fill in the blanks, creating an image that is often more frightening than the reality itself. It is important for children that you explain things to them in a matter-of-fact way and be open to any questions that may arise.
4. **Encourage the child to take appropriate action in response to the event.** Invite the child to write, draw, and/or contact the affected peer on the phone, in a way that is appropriate to the child's developmental stage and level of contact with the peer. Taking action, especially in response to the event, helps children quickly return to functioning and reduces the risk of post-traumatic symptoms.
5. **Pay attention to children who are having a harder time.** If the child isolates him/herself, rarely takes part in activities, reports a lack of appetite, has fears that make it difficult to sleep, etc., allow him/her to share feelings with you and do not censor them. Ask the child what could help him/her relax. Teach the child to take deep breaths, and inhale and exhale together. Offer suitable distractions. Come up with reinforcing sentences together, write them down, and display them in prominent places around the house.
6. **If you need advice or help,** you can contact relevant personnel at the school and/or educational psychological services.
7. **It's important to trust your intuition as parents** and trust your child's—and your own—ability to cope.

Appendix II: Relevant Features of Virtual Communication

In general, the principles of direct speech in the context of a crisis event are effective and relevant. They also apply to virtual communication. The conversation should be held in a convenient medium (Zoom, phone call, etc.). However, virtual communication presents challenges such as:

- **Difficulty reading full body language:** We can only partially see the person in front of us.
- **Lack of complex eye contact:** For example, looking sideways in a virtual meeting may be perceived as disinterest or disconnection.

- **Feelings of exhaustion:** Some people find looking at a screen much more exhausting than normal conversation.
- **Danger of invasion of privacy:** Be aware of this issue, as well as the fact that we are in an open and exposed space. The setting is not controlled, and it is sometimes difficult to establish optimal conditions for discourse (due to noise, family pressures, the need to share a computer, etc.).

We must be aware of the characteristics of all forms of virtual communication and look for solutions to possible challenges in advance. Before the conversation, check the setting with the student and the participating adult. Communicate in advance the advantages and disadvantages of the type of communication. For example, make it clear that if you are looking down, it's because you're writing down points you want to remember, not because you aren't listening. Make sure the call is no longer than 30 minutes unless there is a specific need and an agreement to talk longer. Several short calls are better than one long call.

Appendix III: Resilience-Building Messages That Can Anchor a Conversation

1. People react in different ways. It is important to remember that the way we react affects those around us. It's worthwhile to consider the consequences of what we say about others, every time.
2. Coping together gives us strength. "Togetherness" strengthens us and gives us hope. After a crisis or stressful situation, it's worth saying: "We are going through something difficult, but together we will find the strength to cope and overcome."
3. We all have different coping channels. It's important to identify these within ourselves and reinforce our ability to choose the most appropriate one. (See "Unified Bridge" by Mooli Lahad and Ofra Ayalon.)
4. Any effective action related to the event may help us cope.
5. Humor, joy, and seeing the good in things make it easier to deal with situations of crisis and stress.
6. Listening to a friend in distress and taking interest in his/her well-being can have long-term healing power.
7. Asking for help is a sign of mental strength, not weakness!
8. There are many potential sources of help that you can reach out to: parents, friends, school staff, and professional and therapeutic figures.

Think about the most important message to convey to your child.