



COLLECTIVE WISDOM INC

None of us is as smart as all of us.

The Shirt Pocket Guide to Saying What is Hard to Say

Robert Brown, Ph.D.

Collective Wisdom, Inc.

We have all faced the horrible situation of having to tell someone terrible news; a loved one died, you want to date others, the new car was run over by a steamroller. Few do this well. The reason is that if we are aware of the bad news ahead of time, we feel obligated to deliver the news in a way that should somehow lessen the blow.

Bad news, however, is bad news and is going to be taken as bad news.

You cannot eliminate their pain. You can prepare them. You can soften the blow. You can help them absorb the blow and you can help them recover; all by how to break the news.

Take these three steps:

1. Set the stage
2. Say your lines
3. Stop and listen: do what you are told to do

Setting the stage is like smoothing the road before you drive on it. In many situations it can be as simple as saying, "I have some bad news for you," which is often enough to psychologically prepare the person to hear what you have to say. In other instances, you may have to do more, such as, "My name is Susan Smith and I'm the manager in this department. Something bad has happened and I want to explain it to you. Can we go into my office?"

Say your lines. Tell the person the bad news in one sentence if possible and offer your sympathy. "Your pet squid managed to escape from the hairdressers this morning, ran

into the street and was killed. I'm very sorry." The more you say, the less you communicate. More said at this point is usually an effort to reduce your own anxiety.

Stop and listen. The person is going to react. Until the person reacts, you cannot know what to do to help. Stop and listen (and watch) so you know how best to help as the information sinks in. Most often, simply being there to hear and absorb the reaction is the best and most needed thing to do.

*You cannot make it all better in the beginning: Only at the end.
Do each of the three steps as well as you can, and know
you've done all that can be done.*