Breaking Bad News
A Web-Based Educational Program for Physicians

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The S-P-I-K-E-S Strategy for Breaking Bad News

An effective way to communicate important information, give bad news, and provide crucial support and compassion to patients.

Dr. Robert Buckman
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“The bad news about breaking bad news is that bad news is bad news.”
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A Definition:
Bad news is any news that seriously and adversely affects the patient’s view of his or her future.
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“BEFORE YOU TELL, ASK.”
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Separate MESSAGE from MESSENGER

• Even though the message is bad, the messenger can be seen as part of the support system.
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S  Getting the **SETTING** right,
P  What the patient **PERCEIVES**,  
I  An **INVITATION** to share the news,  
K  Giving the **KNOWLEDGE**,  
E  **EMPATHISING** & **EXPLORING** the patient’s emotions, and  
S  **STRATEGY** and **SUMMARY**.
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S - SETTING

- Physical Context:
  - privacy
  - family members
  - body language - sit down
  - eye contact
  - positioning
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- Physical Context:
  - body language and positioning
  - “the psychotherapy neutral position”
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- Listening Skills:
  - silence
  - repetition
  - “listening mode”
  - touch (as appropriate)
  - avoid office interruptions
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**P** - Finding Out What the Patient Knows or **PERCEIVES**

- Different ways of asking
- Assess vocabulary and comprehension
- Note denial (if present)
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I - INVITATION by the Patient to Share the Information

- Different ways of asking
- Level of information to provide
- Aim to get a clear invitation
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K - Giving the KNOWLEDGE and Medical Facts

• Aligning—starting at a point compatible with the patient’s current comprehension and terminology
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K (continued) Giving KNOWLEDGE

• Small chunks - check reception
• Avoid “medspeak”
• Adjust pace according to patient’s response
• Acknowledge all responses
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**E - Acknowledging EMOTIONS**

- Avoid downplaying severity of situation
- The “Empathic Response”
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The Empathic Response

1. Identify the emotion (theirs or yours)
2. Identify the source of the emotion
3. Respond in a way that shows you have made that connection
   - You don’t have to agree with the viewpoint
   - You don’t have to feel the emotion yourself
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E-V-E: The key to addressing emotions

Each response should be one of these

- EXPLORING
- VALIDATING
- EMPATHIC
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S - STRATEGY & SUMMARY

• Develop plan collaboratively
• Summarize main areas
• “Any questions for now?”
• Clear plan for next steps
A Summary

The S-P-I-K-E-S Method

• Easy to remember steps
• Physicians can separate themselves from the “bad news”
• A quality and fair approach for good patient care
Breaking bad news is never easy or pleasant: but at least having some plan or approach increases the professional’s feeling of confidence - and that is often perceived as increased competence.”
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References


Giving Bad News …

- Good patient care
- Fulfillment as a physician
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