The SPIKES communication framework in clinical practice

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<th>S</th>
<th>SETTING UP the conversation</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose a setting with privacy and without interruptions, ensuring that you have:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A private space</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Turned phones to silent</td>
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<td>Turned pagers off</td>
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<td>Allowed sufficient time for the conversation</td>
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<td>Help the person to understand what they are hearing by confirming and explaining medical facts</td>
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<td>Check the accuracy of all available information – including test results and that you have the right person</td>
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<td>Plan what you will say</td>
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<td>Decide on general terminology to be used</td>
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<td>Consider your own emotional reaction to providing the distressing news</td>
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<td>Find out in advance if the person wants anyone else to be present.</td>
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<td>Find out if the person requires a professional interpreter to be present and, if so, arrange for this ahead of time. Using family or friends as interpreters is not recommended for conversations about health matters.</td>
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The more reassured you feel about the setting the more at ease, available and helpful, you will appear to the person.

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<th>P</th>
<th>Assessing the Person’s PERCEPTION</th>
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<td>Find out how much the person knows already – in particular, how serious they think the illness is and how much it will affect the future. This helps you gauge how close to the medical reality their understanding is – or if they are in denial</td>
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<td>“What do you understand about your illness?”</td>
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<td>“What have you been told you so far?”</td>
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<td>Look for emotional cues and body language. Verbal and non-verbal cues can indicate possible anxiety levels and comprehension about the information you have provided:</td>
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<td>“Where do you think you are up to in regard to your health?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“What is your understanding of the situation and its potential outcomes?”</td>
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This information helps you to decide on the pacing and content of the conversation.
Obtaining the Person’s INVITATION

- Find out what the person wants to know – you must be committed to honesty and respecting their wishes if they do not want to be informed. Pacing and phrasing of questions are geared to this goal
  - “Would it be okay to talk about this now?”
  - “How much would you like to know?”

- Find out what they already know

- Explore how much detail they would like
  - “Do you like the big picture or the details?”
  - “If this turns out to be something serious are you the kind of person who likes to know exactly what’s going on”
  - “Would you like me to tell you the details of the diagnosis?”

- Consider any cultural variations that are required

- Give the person control over hearing the news:
  - Allow the person to voluntarily decline to receive information
  - Allow the person to designate someone to communicate on their behalf.

Providing KNOWLEDGE and Information to the Person

- Decide on the objectives for the conversation

- Consider what the person knows and needs to know in order to work with you in managing their illness, including:
  - Diagnosis
  - Treatment Plan
  - Prognosis
  - Support

- Give the person a warning:
  - “It’s not what we hoped for I’m afraid . . .”
  - “I have something serious to discuss with you”
  - “Well, the situation does appear to be more serious than that”

- Provide information in small chunks

- Be clear and direct

- Use plain language

- Avoid jargon, complex medical terminology and acronyms

- Check understanding often and clarify where required
  - “Am I making sense?”
  - “This might be a bit confusing, do you roughly follow what I’m saying?”

- Repeat important points (people who are upset or shocked don’t hear or remember well)

- Use diagrams, written messages and pamphlets as an aid

- Respond to concerns and questions.
### Addressing the person’s EMOTIONS with empathic responses

- Observe the person and give them time to react and comprehend the news
- Acknowledge any emotional response without criticism or blame:
  - “I can see that this is making you angry”
  - “I can see that this is really upsetting for you”
  - “I can see that you are really worried about . . .”
- Ask the person what they are thinking or feeling:
  - “What are your fears and what are your hopes?”
- Listen and explore if you are unclear about what they are expressing
- Respond empathically
- Resist the temptation to make the distressing news better than it is
- Allow time for silence.

### Strategy and Summary

- Demonstrate a genuine understanding of the person’s concerns:
  - “How are you going to tell your spouse? Would you like me to help?”
  - “What are your concerns? Do you want to talk about them?”
- Distinguish the fixable from the unfixable
- Make a plan or strategy and explain it by providing information on tests, treatment options, referrals and other aspects of care
- Prepare for the worst and hope for the best:
  - “Let’s plan for the worst but hope for the best”
- Identify coping strategies for the person and suggest other sources of support that they can access (this includes referral to other services)
- Explain what happens next
- Schedule a follow up appointment so that they have the opportunity for further questions.