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Breaking Bad News in a Clinical Setting

Experiment 2 - Practical Notes

Name: _____ Roll no.: _____ Date: _____

Aim

To demonstrate an empathetic, supportive conversation after difficult news has been disclosed by the responsible clinician.

Principle

Difficult news needs privacy, honest language, time for emotion and a clear next step. Students can practise supportive communication, but diagnosis, prognosis and treatment decisions remain with the authorised clinical professional. Silence can be helpful when it gives the person time to respond.

Practice Case

Fictional simulation: A clinician has told Arun that further evaluation is needed for a serious condition. Arun looks distressed and asks the pharmacy learner, "Does this mean I will never get better?" The learner does not have information to answer the prognosis.

Roles and Scoring

Work in a group of three: learner, patient or partner, and observer. Score each criterion 0 = not demonstrated, 1 = partly demonstrated, 2 = clearly demonstrated. The checklist is for classroom feedback, not a validated clinical assessment.

Requirements

- Case sheet, quiet practice space and timer.
- Observer checklist and notebook; no real patient details.

Procedure

1. Prepare the setting

Arrange privacy, seating and freedom from interruptions. Ask whether the person wants a support person present.

2. Check understanding

Ask what the clinician has explained and what the person is most concerned about. Do not repeat unverified information.

3. Acknowledge emotion

Use a brief, sincere reflection, pause and allow the person to respond. Avoid rushing to reassurance.

4. Handle uncertainty honestly

State the limits of your role and knowledge. Offer to help them formulate questions for the responsible clinician.

5. Agree the next step

Summarise what is known, identify who can answer unresolved questions and confirm an immediate support or follow-up plan.

Healthcare Psychology and Communication Skills

Suggested Practice Dialogue

- Patient: "I am frightened. I do not know what happens next."
- Learner: "This sounds very worrying. What would you most like the clinician to explain?"
- Learner: "I cannot predict the outcome, but I can help you write your questions and arrange a discussion with the treating team."

Observations and Record

Criterion	Score 0 / 1 / 2	Observed behaviour
Private and respectful setting	___	_____
Checks existing understanding	___	_____
Acknowledges emotion without false reassurance	___	_____
Appropriate role and next-step plan	___	_____

Worked Example

The numbers below are illustrative; enter your own observations in the record.

- Illustrative scores: 2 + 1 + 2 + 2 = 7/8. Repeat the exercise with a clearer question about what the patient already understands.

Result

Total score: ___ / 8. Record one effective phrase, one missed opportunity and one specific action for the next attempt.

Precautions

- Do not disclose an unconfirmed diagnosis or invent prognosis.
- Avoid phrases such as "everything will be fine" when the outcome is unknown.
- Do not leave the person without an agreed immediate source of support.

Viva Questions and Answers

1. Why check understanding first?

The person may have heard or interpreted the news differently.

2. What can a pause achieve?

It allows processing and emotional expression without forcing a response.

3. What is a suitable response to an unknown prognosis?

Be honest about uncertainty and connect the person with the responsible clinician.

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