# Talking to relatives

Your guide to compassionate phone communication during COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>NOT</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td><strong>Speak slowly</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello my name is [name], I am [role].</td>
<td>I’m calling to give you an update on your mother Mary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### When conveying bad news

- **DO**
  - Do you have someone with you for support?

### Establish what they know

- **DO**
  - Can you tell me what you know about your mum’s condition?

## 2. Effectively displaying empathy

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<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Listen</strong></td>
<td><strong>Empathise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am so sorry. Please, take your time.</td>
<td>It must be very hard to take this in, particularly over the phone. Is there anything I can do right now to make it easier for you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Acknowledge

- **DO**
  - I can hear how upset you are. We know how hard it is when you are unable to visit at such an important time.

### If possible, offer a virtual connection

- **DO**
  - Would you like to talk with Mary over the phone or see her via video call?

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*Use simple language, remember to pause. Use the person’s name. Be clear with your information and statements.*

*Use jargon. Use unclear phrases.*
3. Helpful concepts

**Honesty with uncertainty**
- It looks like Mary is improving, but it’s hard to predict with COVID-19.
- We need to take it day-by-day and keep a close eye on Mary, as things may change very quickly.
- I can’t promise that things will be ok but I can promise that we will always be honest and help you understand what is going on.

**Sick enough to die**
- Mary is very unwell and her body is getting tired. Unfortunately she’s now so sick that she could die in the next few hours to days.

**Hope for the best, plan for the worst**
- There are treatments that might help Mary get better, like giving oxygen to help her breathe, but we’re worried she may not recover.
- We’re doing all we can, but we need to talk about what to do if Mary gets sicker.

**Death**
- I’m so sorry to tell you this over the phone, but sadly Mary died a few minutes ago.
- If possible, reassure that someone was present
  Giving details about whether it was peaceful, and whether the person had personalised care are also helpful.

4. Ending the call

**Don’t rush**
- Before I say goodbye, do you have any questions?

**Next steps**
- Do you need any further information or support?

5. After the call

**These situations and conversations can be difficult**
- Debrief with a colleague or manager.
- Contact the Employee Assistance Program or another support service.
- Ensure you document your conversation in the person’s medical record.