Delivering unwanted news doesn't have to be an awkward middle school dance.
Nathan Walch
Advisor for students struggling academically

Melanie Burton
Advisor for students struggling academically

Julee Braithwaite
Advisor for high-profile, limited-enrollment programs

Sam Brown
Director for international students

Lisa Parkinson
Advisor for admissions, scholarships, and financial aid

Scott Hosford
Director for students struggling academically
WHAT WE ARE GOING TO TALK ABOUT:

1. Difficulty of unwanted news
2. Advisor survey results
3. Other unwanted news research
4. Typical and dangerous responses to unwanted news
5. Tools
   a. Empathy
   b. Positive psychology theories
6. When it fails ...
What was your worst experience giving unwanted news to a student?
Unwanted News Survey

Measured:
• Type of news
• Frequency

Survey (n=154):
• 3 large institutions (Utah and California)

Respondents’ primary responsibilities:
• Academic Advisors: 72%
• Specialty Advisors: 24%
• Other: 4%
How often do you share unwanted news with students?

- 78.20% ≥ monthly
- 20.51% Weekly
- 36.54% Monthly
- 12.82% Rarely
- 1.28% Never
What type of unwanted news do you give?

- Policy Change/Updates: 17.2%
- Graduation/Completion of Studies: 17%
- Student Status: 16%
- Program/Major Admissions: 11.7%
- Grades/Test Scores: 9.2%
- Other: 6.6%
- Finances: 5.5%
- Employment: 5.3%
- Academic Integrity Issues: 4.4%
- Social Behavior: 4.1%
- University Admission: 3.0%
Preferences for Receiving Unwanted News

2013 Study\(^1\):
- “Explanatory buffer” needed

2014 Study\(^2\):
- Bad news before follow-up explanation

2017 Study\(^3\):
- Social: indirect approach valued
- Physical hazards: clear, visual signage
Preferences for Receiving Unwanted News

Context Matters!
Typical Responses to Unwanted News
Shame
Anxiety
Fear
Anger
Denial
Shock
Sadness
Dangerous Responses to Unwanted News
Counseling Microskills for Advisors

Counseling skills

- Rapport building
- Reflective listening
- Minimal encouragers
- Open-ended questions
- Empathy
- Problem solving
- Requesting concreteness
- Confrontation
- Immediacy
EMPATHY
Why is it important?
Why Empathy?

Dysregulated emotions
- Interactions and connections
- “Coregulation of affect”\(^4\)
Why Empathy?

**Carl Rogers:**
  • “Being understood is the most basic human need.”

**Leslie Greenberg:**
  • An empathic relationship “is a curative factor ... in and of itself.”
Empathy Defined

- Concern and respect for another person
- Working to understand others’ thoughts and feelings
- Communicating that understanding verbally and nonverbally
- Suspending judgment
Empathy and Validation

“The best way to validate people’s emotional experience is to communicate that their emotional responses are understandable and make sense in the context of their own occurrence or their lives in general.”

4
Enacting Empathy

Verbal:

- Reflective listening
  - Meaning + Emotion
- Minimal encouragers
- Pacing
“Giving others advice in emotional moments about the merits of more rational or realistic solutions serves only to invalidate their experience.”\(^4\)
Nope
• “I know how you feel.”
• “I have had the exact same experience.”

Yep
• “I can only imagine how you might feel right now”
• “I can’t imagine how [insert emotion word here] this must be.”
“You only understand people if you feel them in yourself.”

John Steinbeck
Kiki - Crisis

危機

機

危機

Kikai - Opportunity
Positive Psychology Theories

Well-Being Theory\(^6,7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short-term wellbeing (hedonic wellbeing)</th>
<th>Sustainable wellbeing (eudemonic wellbeing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modulate ratio of positive negative emotions (3:1)</td>
<td>Increase sense of meaning and purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure basic life needs are satisfied</td>
<td>Live authentically in line with strengths and values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster positive relationships</td>
<td>Increase sense of autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know and use strengths</td>
<td>Live in line with “true self”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase experiences of flow</td>
<td>Build resilience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Positive Psychology Theories

• Strengths Theory\textsuperscript{6}
  Strengths = Better feelings, function, & performance

• What we can do:
  1. Help students identify their strengths
  2. Create conditions that foster feelings of competence
  3. Help students link strengths to goals/action
Positive Psychology Theories

• Broaden-and-Build Theory\textsuperscript{6, 7, 8}
  Parallel plans
Positive Psychology Theories

• Broaden-and-Build Theory$^{6, 7, 8}$

• What we can do:
  1. Encourage 3:1
  2. Focus on value of effort
  3. Help students find positive meaning
Positive Psychology Theories

- **Self-Determination Theory**
  Basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness

- **What we can do:**
  1. Discuss what is meaningful
  2. Help students establish reasons and values for action
  3. Provide autonomy support
CASE STUDIES DISCUSSION
WHEN IT FAILS
• Don’t take it personal
• Take a walk
• Reschedule
• Debrief with colleagues
• Settle emotions before analyzing
Alternate Resources
Survey Participants Needed
nathan_walch@byu.edu
References


References


