

Elements of Effective Injury Communication

Injury communication is an essential component of injured family care. In its broadest sense, 'injury communication' refers both to the *exchange of information* — provision and delivery of information related to the injury, and to the *impact of information* — family and family member capacity to process information, and its behavioral impact on the family. Effective injury communication involves the timely, appropriate and accurate sharing of information from the moment of notification of injury throughout treatment and rehabilitation.



A primary goal of injury communication, to be achieved over time, is helping family members integrate the injury experience through a process of *shared understanding*. To this end, ongoing dialogue about the injury and its implications is extremely important. Experts in injured family care, especially war related injury and its impact on military children and families, have developed this fact sheet to help healthcare providers — hospital and community-based — provide quality communication and compassionate outreach that supports injury recovery, family function and health.

Dimensions of Injury Communication

Injury communication can be conceptualized across three dimensions: relationships, developmental ages, and time.

Across Relationships

Effective injury communication involves sharing information across multiple relationships. Specific communication needs develop between the injured and spouse, among family members, with health care providers, as well as friends and other community support resources. Relationships present different challenges and abilities for optimally communicate. Family members who are able to speak with friends may find it difficult to speak with their injured spouse. Parents who are able to comfortably talk with adults may have difficulty talking to their own children or teenagers about the injury.

Across Developmental Stages

Communication needs vary developmentally. Children

require unique approaches depending upon their age and cognitive ability. Teenagers may have more adult understanding of the details of a parental injury, but younger children (preschoolers and young school aged children) are likely to lack the maturity necessary to understand the experience. Younger children may have emotional responses that overwhelm them and can sometimes develop cognitive distortions in response to their complicated or stressful experiences. Regardless of age, all children and teens are likely to have emotional responses that must be understood from a developmental perspective.

Across Time

Injury communication priorities change over time. For example, helping parents prepare children to visit a hospitalized parent (see Family sheet for specific information) or effectively asking questions of nurses and doctors is critical immediately after the injury. As injured service members make the transition back to their communities, families will need to initiate new discussions with local health care providers and community

Tips for Parents

- Parents should always be open to questions their children have and be prepared to answer them in a straightforward manner, without either dodging them or providing too much information.
- Even when children don't readily ask questions (due to discomfort), parents may wish to broach a subject or reassure the child that they are prepared to talk about something whenever the child would like or feels ready.
- In circumstances when parents believe that information is more sensitive or private, children can be reassured that their questions are understood and respected but that the details are something that will be discussed by parents alone.
- Children of all ages including infants and toddlers are extremely sensitive to the emotional reactions of their parents. As parents are the primary sources of emotional support for children, parental availability, calmness and emotional steadiness are key factors in supporting children's sense of safety.

support personnel. Continued communication with children remains important throughout injury recovery. Longer-term injury communication challenges can also include the need to address injury related challenges to relationship intimacy.

Elements of Effective Injury Communication

Effective injury communication involves four elements: measured openness, conciseness and clarity, timeliness and readiness, and connectedness and availability.

Measured Openness

Creating an atmosphere in which all members of the family feel comfortable asking questions, seeking information and assistance is extremely important. Many families look to healthcare professionals for guidance on communicating about the injury with their children who they often believe should be “protected” from unpleasant information. This strategy often backfires as youngsters typically pick up on the fact that some unidentified event has happened causing them to assume the worst. Even with the youngest child, secrets are unhelpful and can dramatically add to emotional discomfort or fear. *This does not suggest that all information should be shared with individuals both within and outside the family. Families would do best to weigh how much information to share based upon a “need to know” and a “capacity to know” basis.*

Conciseness and Clarity

The injury communication process is likely to produce significant anxiety and emotional distress for family members and friends. It is important that healthcare professionals allow families time to integrate what they hear, making it easier for them to ask questions or respond clearly. Providing families with “sound bites” – concise and clear messages about the injury that they can repeat to extended family, friends and community (teachers, coaches, etc) will be helpful and appreciated by the injured family spokesperson. *Suggest having or provide paper and a pen to enable injured families to write down important information as well as questions. Many families have someone present to record the information; someone on the healthcare team can volunteer to do so as well.*

Timeliness and Readiness

Under the stress of injury notification, hospitalization or extended recovery, individuals may delay sharing information in a timely manner, especially parents with their children. But,

extended delays are likely to lead to a sense of secrecy, distrust, worry or betrayal if information is withheld from those vested with a “need to know.” Children who worry when they sense parents are not being straight up with them may experience separation anxiety for fear that something bad will happen in their absence.

Not uncommonly, individuals or the family as a unit may not feel ready to address certain challenges that develop as a result of injury. It is important to gauge when family members are *ready* to talk about challenges or solve problems. Asking a question like “are you ready to talk about that now?” provides an opportunity for family members to express their unease in addressing a particular topic, but also places an expectation that the topic is capable of being discussed, if not now, in the future. *Helping parents and other family members work toward a sense of “readiness” can lead to a greater sense of competence in handling the toughest issues.*

Connectedness and Availability

Communication both within and outside of the family requires healthy connection to resources and supports within extended families, neighborhoods, communities and care systems. In addition to being able to obtain and share important information related to family functioning in the wake of a severe injury, adults must be prepared to seek out additional resources when necessary to meet the evolving needs of the family as a whole and individual family members. *Connection to trusted health care providers or community support resources makes it more likely family members will seek out help when challenges arise.*

Injury communication as a Teachable Moment

Injury communication is both a process and an opportunity for healthcare providers.

In the process of communicating with families about combat injury, there are multiple opportunities to educate and help families understand the importance of connectedness and availability – both within the family and the greater community. Understanding the impact of injury on children, especially from a developmental perspective, enables you to guide families on how best to communicate with children to sustain hope, connection to both parents and to their family and community routines. *Ultimately, effective injury communication helps injured families learn the skills of self-advocacy, leading to protection from isolation, a sense of connectedness, the capacity for appropriate and timely help-seeking, and family problem-solving.*



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