

SOMETHING WENT WRONG. NOW YOU HAVE TO TELL THE PATIENT.

How to stay clear when the conversation is the part you want to avoid

You may not have every answer yet. You still need to stay present, control what you say is true, and give the patient a next step you can honor.



THE HARDEST PART MAY BEGIN AFTER THE PROCEDURE ENDS

At some point, treatment will not unfold exactly as expected. You may know what happened immediately, or you may only know that the result is not what you intended.

Fear can make a clinician delay the conversation, flood the patient with technical detail, speculate, blame someone else, or make promises before the facts are clear. The patient usually needs something more disciplined.

You do not need every answer before you speak. You do need control of what you say is true.

WHAT THIS RESOURCE WILL NOT DO

It will not give you a complete clinical, legal, or workplace protocol. It will help you recognize the decision in front of you, identify the information or support that is missing, and choose a safer next step without pretending certainty.

WHAT THE PATIENT NEEDS FIRST

The first conversation should create clarity—not manufacture certainty you do not have.

1

WHAT IS KNOWN

State what is known right now plainly, without hiding behind jargon.

2

WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

Name the unanswered part without filling the gap with guesses.

3

WHAT IT MEANS NOW

Explain the immediate implication, including any time-sensitive concern.

4

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Define the next step, timing, and who remains responsible for follow-up.

5

CONTINUED PRESENCE

A difficult outcome should not make the patient feel abandoned by the person who treated them.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

Separate facts from the story your fear is writing.

- ☐ Review the record and establish what is actually known.

- ☐ Separate direct observations from assumptions about cause.

- ☐ Identify the immediate clinical next step and whether consultation is needed.

- ☐ Do not blame the patient, team member, laboratory, or another clinician to protect yourself.

- ☐ Avoid promises about outcome, cost, responsibility, or resolution that you cannot guarantee.

- ☐ Document the discussion, questions, next step, and follow-up plan.

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION DOES NOT BECOME SAFER BECAUSE IT IS POSTPONED

1

STAY WITH THE FACTS

Do not speculate simply because silence feels uncomfortable.

2

STAY WITH THE PATIENT

Do not let fear of the reaction turn into distance or disappearance.

3

STAY WITH THE NEXT STEP

The conversation needs a concrete plan, an owner, and follow-up.

You do not need every answer before you speak. You do need control of what you say is true.

A short guide can give you language and a place to start. It cannot see your schedule, hear your conversations, or weigh the trade-offs in your position. Without context, even good advice stays generic.

For a deeper dive, explore the New DDS Unfiltered Digital Library or work directly with Dr. K.

NewDDSUnfiltered.com

Professional note: This guide is not a disclosure protocol, legal advice, or patient-specific clinical guidance. Follow applicable professional duties, office policies, and risk-management requirements.