

Giving People Anticipatory Guidance

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“Anticipatory guidance” is a term-of-art for telling people what to expect.

The benefits of anticipatory guidance:

- People don't feel blindsided. Trust in you increases.
- People can prepare themselves emotionally and logistically, and therefore can cope better when the time comes.
- People don't feel so alarmed. Advance warning does raise some anxiety of its own if it's about possible bad outcomes – but not nearly as much as uncertain waiting or surprising bad news.

Why you won't want to do it:

- Why make people worry before you have to?
- Why put foolish ideas into their heads?
- What if you turn out wrong?

Three situations where anticipatory guidance is especially useful:

1. *When it's about bad news to come.* “We think there will probably be some secondary infections soon.” “Some of the patients now hospitalized can be expected to die.” “Most experts expect more attacks.”
2. *When it's about uncertainty and possible error.* “We will learn things in the coming weeks that everyone will wish we had known when we started.”
3. *When it's about our own likely reactions.* “A lot of patients have trouble not scratching the vaccination scab.” “By next week people may be experiencing feelings of anger and helplessness.” “You will probably be tempted to go off the antibiotic after a week or two of these side-effects.”

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