

Recently, I got a phone call from my mother. Her tone of voice and the time of the call alerted me to expect bad news. She said "I have something to tell you. Your aunt called this morning and left a message asking us to call her right away." That sentence allowed my brain to be processing: (1) since my aunt called, the issue was about family; (2) because she requested a call right away, it was bad news; and (3) she needed to relay information and probably also needed support. The next sentence from my mother was the bad news, the death of a cousin.

As dispute resolution professionals, we often deliver "bad news." We are the bearers of messages difficult to hear: no agreement; refusal to consider a proposal; an unacceptable offer; new information that does not support the party's perspective; an expert opinion. We assist people in processing that bad news. We use body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and words themselves to prepare our clients for the messages we deliver.

I thought about my mother's call in the context of my work. I considered my mother's deliberate choices in delivering bad news. She purposely sent signals and gave me time to prepare, albeit only a few seconds. I needed the subtle hints to allow me to make myself ready to hear something difficult to accept. Even those few seconds made a difference to my ability to respond to bad news. I hope I am as good at providing clients the opportunity to prepare as my mother was in talking with me.