

YOUR CAREER
GET-AHEAD GUIDE

HOW TO HAVE A TOUGH TALK

No one is better with uncomfortable topics than an ob-gyn. **Jennifer Ashton, MD**, can teach you to sail through awkward conversations no matter what you do for a living.

Be Approachable

I don't wear a doctor's white coat in my office because I want patients to feel like they are coming to talk to a friend and can tell me anything. You can convey warmth and approachability in any line of work—keeping personal photos and mementos at your desk is a great way to humanize yourself so colleagues feel comfortable sharing sensitive information with you.

Establish a Rapport

If you need to glean sensitive information from someone, start by asking easy, open-ended questions to make her feel comfortable. I always begin an appointment by asking my patients, "How are you?" and "What's new?" This is where typically I would hear, "Oh, I quit my job" or "I have a new boyfriend." You get really helpful intel when you just let people talk. Once you have that bond, it's so much easier to broach tough topics and have a productive conversation.

Pick a Good Moment

Don't sit on bad news, and never e-mail or outsource the delivery to someone else. If I'm calling a patient,

I say, "Do you have a second? Is this a good time?" I want her to be able to ask questions or cry without feeling awkward or embarrassed because she's at her desk. When meeting in person, find a private, nonintrusive place and strategic moment. If I'm going to ask a patient how many sex partners she has had or whether she's been using protection, I will literally wait until I'm sitting on the stool between her legs. Whatever your workplace, a more intimate setting yields a more honest answer.

Say It Clearly

When people are upset, they don't really hear what you're saying and they get confused. Be very straightforward about what's happening. I might say, "I have the results back. Your BRCA genetic test is positive" or "You definitely have been exposed to genital herpes." I condense the big picture into a one-liner, then hand over a piece of paper on which I've written the specific next steps.

Look for a Silver Lining

Emphasize any positives associated with the bad news—maybe you highlight that it's great you caught the issue early or you frame the information as a way to motivate change. Focusing on positives keeps your recipient future-oriented. Just keep the hope grounded in reality. Say, "I know this may be hard. But we're going to help you get through it."



DR. ASHTON TAKES THE COSMO CAREER QUIZ

WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST STRENGTH?

My ability to multitask. I can triage my to-do list and then attack each task with laser focus.

WHAT IS THE BEST PART OF YOUR JOB?

Communicating information to women who later tell me that our interaction changed or saved their life. Best feeling ever.

WHAT DO YOU WEAR TO WORK?

A cashmere sweater in gray, black, or navy, black Lululemon leggings, and black Prada biker boots.

HOW DO YOU FIND BALANCE?

Be unconflicted. Whatever I'm doing, I go all-in and silence the guilty internal voice that says I should be doing something else.

Dr. Ashton is a medical contributor for Cosmo and ABC News.

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