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Malaysia Airlines Text: How Not to Break Bad News



By **Stephanie Pappas, Senior Writer**
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Amid the news yesterday (March 24) that officials have determined that Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 must have ended tragically in the Southern Indian Ocean was a nugget that made many cringe: Malaysia Airlines officials had apparently broken the news to some grieving families via text message.

"Malaysia Airlines deeply regrets that we have to assume beyond any reasonable doubt that [MH370 has been lost](#) and that none of those on board survived," the text read. "As you will hear in the next hour from Malaysia's Prime Minister, we must now accept all evidence suggests the plane went down in the Southern Indian Ocean."

Follow-up reports have made clear that the airline also contacted families by phone and in person; the texts were apparently an effort to ensure that all family members heard from officials and not the news media. But the episode reflects the increasing role that [text messaging](#) plays in serious communications, from break-ups to medical interventions — though experts agree that horrible news is best broken in person. [[Facts About Malaysia Airlines Flight 370](#)]

Texting gets serious

Text messaging is becoming part of the communications toolkit for medical professionals. Badal Patel, a rheumatologist with the South Manchester University Hospitals Trust in the United Kingdom, started using texting to communicate with patients in 2002.

"It's worked very well," Patel told Live Science. "I can promptly inform patients of their results, I can give them further advice or interim advice, and I can answer their worries and queries."

Texting is convenient and easy to do between patients and meetings, Patel said. Texting patients about upcoming appointments has also helped to reduce no-shows. And mobile phones have such a wide user base that texting tends to be an easier way to reach out than social media, for example. [[5 Wacky Things That Are Good for Your Health](#)]

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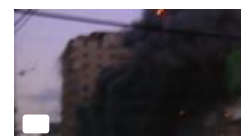
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Likewise, public health officials are increasingly using texting in an effort to reach out to people in need — particularly [struggling teens](#). Crisis Text Line, a nonprofit founded in August 2013, gives teens a free, 24/7 text "hotline" to contact by texting "LIS-TEN" to 741-741. Teen mental health organization Reach Out has a similar text chat line staffed during specific times each week.

"I think that a lot of people (including me) finds [sic] it easier to text someone about their problems," a Reach Out user wrote on the organization's website [last year](#). "It's easier, and I always have my phone with me, no matter where I am."

Other innovative uses of texting include a text hotline by the anti-human-trafficking organization The Polaris Project, which allows victims or concerned people to text 233733 ("BeFree") to get an instant connection to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center. And the Department of Health and Human Services has a number of [text communication programs](#), including Text4Baby, which allows new moms to subscribe to get texts with baby-care advice. The National Cancer Institute has a similar smoking cessation text program called QuitNowTXT.

Pitfalls of text

All of these programs strive to meet people where they are, said Scottye Cash, a professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

"How do we help adolescents in a place that makes sense to them?" said Cash, who has researched teen communications about suicidal thoughts on MySpace and other tech outlets. Teens who would never dream of calling a hotline will text about their problems, Cash told Live Science. [[Top 10 Stigmatized Health Disorders](#)]

Keeping text-based lines of communication open may help people open up about sensitive subjects. But when it comes to delivering bad news, text is not the way to go, said Worth Kilcrease, a bereavement counselor in Austin, Texas.

"It is so cold, so impersonal, so lacking any kind of compassion and [empathy](#), that it is just inhumane," Kilcrease told Live Science.

That's a memo apparently lost on some: A Pew Research survey on Internet use from 2013 found that 22 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds had broken up with someone over text messaging, and 28 percent had been dumped by text. The numbers were lower in older age groups, with 16 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds reporting having dumped someone by text, and only 7 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds saying they'd done so.

Breaking bad news about death, particularly a sudden, unex-



Photographer Wong Maye-E



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pected death, is best done in person, Kilcrease said. The general rule is to make sure the person getting the news has friends or family nearby for support, he said. Avoid euphemisms and be straightforward with the known facts.

"It is such a shock that they are already subject to some degree of trauma just because of the experience that is going on," Kilcrease said of notifying someone of a sudden death. That's why in-person communication is so important, he said: "To have it magnified by removing it from any kind of personal interfacing or communication is just horrendous."

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