



**Craig Carr**, PCC, business and personal coach states, “Breaking that trust, even if it appears to be telling good news, results in harm if there is not explicit permission to speak it outside the relationship.”

**T**he question of what to hold confidentially is 90% black and white and 10% grey, so I’m glad you brought up the question. The 10% is what we can always debate, argue and massage with our personal ethics and choices. The 90% is the distinct content that is no one else’s business and to reveal it would clearly be a breach of trust. Breaking that trust, even if it appears to be telling good news, results in harm if there is not explicit permission to speak it outside the relationship. In a case of sudden death, I don’t believe you have that permission.

Before getting to the 10% in which you may find yourself, I’d like to say a few words about *anonymity*, a close cousin to confidentiality that often gets confused. When training new coaches and in furthering our professional development we will find ourselves sharing content—like in this Sticky Situations column—but we remain fiercely committed to not connecting the content to an identity. If there is ever a shadow of a doubt that identity might

be breached, *don’t do it!* And please don’t engage in gossip or small talk in the name of anonymity, either. If there is going to be conversation about client stuff, have it be focused and count for something.

Now, back to your specific situation—which brings up the personal assessment of how much to say is too much. The answer lies in the details versus the ‘space.’ As far as the specific dreams and goals your client had that were never fulfilled, but that he shared with you, leave them alone—they are bittersweet, tragic and confidential. Speaking of them to his wife and daughter may seem important to you, but could likely be a seduction into the drama of the moment, and more about your pain than theirs. The context of his love and caring for his family, presumably being part of the motive he had for coaching in the first place, is perfectly appropriate to share. Generally, it sounds like you have a good handle on the situation. It might just take some extra self-management to not get caught up in the emotions of the family.



**Carol Adrienne**, PhD says, “My rule of thumb would be not to communicate with them unless they asked you specifically about his sessions with you.”

**C**onfidentiality is determined on a state-by-state basis. Some states protect the client-therapist relationship in court cases; others demand disclosure in court cases. Of course, here there is no official request for information. You are personally feeling an urge to communicate your client’s thoughts and emotions to his family.

Even if your state allows disclosure after death, my rule of thumb would be not to communicate with them unless they asked you specifically about his sessions with you. Even then, it might be best to respond with generalized positive memories of what he said without disclosing anything that was not meant to leave the session. Be sure to establish the fact that you are not comfortable breaking confidentiality about your client’s work with you. Then perhaps you

could say something such as, “I will say that your husband was devoted to you and to your daughter, and spoke about you both only in the best of terms.” If you talk about anything specific, for example, about what he had wanted for them in the future, you are only opening up a conversation that you cannot professionally continue.

Taking it upon yourself to speak with the family, and intentionally breaking confidentiality, sends the message that you are opening the door for a discussion. The wife may decide that she wants to know other sorts of things. Then you would find it difficult to make a judgment call about what to say or not say. Despite your desire to pass along your client’s good feelings and hopes for his family, this might be a time to let things go and keep silent.