

Substance abuse and overdose...

When a loved one dies

Grief reactions are often intricate and complex. When you add that your loved one died from an overdose, accidental or not, it complicates matters. There are myriad emotions that occur when someone dies, but when the death is from an overdose, the most difficult ones rise to the surface.

If you have experienced the death of a loved one from an overdose or substance abuse, your reactions may be unlike anything you have ever experienced. Your feelings and reactions are common in what feels like an abnormal situation or uncharted waters. If you have experienced these or continue to experience these, please know that the intensity and duration changes over time.

Emotions after an overdose or substance abuse death:

- **Sadness** over not having had a chance to say good-bye or things left unsaid
- **Anger** at your loved one, yourself or others who played a part in their addiction
- Sometimes the bereaved feel **guilty**. You may re-live over and over the “should haves, could haves” and “if onlys.” You may blame yourself or others.
- Some feel judged or ashamed for loving someone with an addiction or for having an addiction themselves. Unfortunately, **shame** makes people hesitant to share. Consequently, they don’t reach out but rather become **isolated and lonely**. It is a sad, downward spiral.
- **Relief** because you are no longer waiting for more terrible news or the next upsetting phone call.
- **Frustration** that the system could not help or with the response from police or EMS. There may also be frustration if you lacked access to medical information for a loved one over age 18.
- You may feel a need to place **blame** on yourself, someone else or your deceased loved one.
- The **stigma** society imposes for substance abuse loss is overwhelming. You may fear judgment from others regarding you, your family and your deceased loved one. Unfortunately, people deeply misunderstand addiction.
- **Fear and anxiety** are also prevalent grief reactions with a substance abuse death. There is the fear that other family members or friends currently using might also die. And, there is the fear of relapse for people in recovery.

What can help:

- Accept the reality of the circumstances of the death including the role substances played. Talk about your complicated feelings and grief reactions. This may help others who have experienced the same type of loss and voicing your grief can help change the stigma associated with death from overdose.
- Find healthy ways to acknowledge and express your feelings. This could be through talking, writing, making art or music, hiking, etc. Do what works for you.
- Don't define your loved one by his or her addiction. The circumstances of the death do not take away the fact that this was a person who was valued and loved – a person **you** valued and loved who deserves to be remembered and grieved. Find a way to honor his or her legacy.
- Educate yourself about addiction. Understanding addiction can help put to rest feelings of guilt and blame. One thing to learn is that we are powerless. It doesn't matter how much money we have or how hard we love, we cannot control someone else's addiction.
- Surround yourself with the right support system. Avoid those who disenfranchise your grief. Research what specific resources are available in the area of addiction loss. You might find comfort with a counselor or a support group with others who are also experiencing grief of an overdose death.

Websites:

<http://grasphelp.org/> GRASP is Grief Recovery After Substance Abuse Passing, a national resource founded to provide sources of help, compassion and understanding for those whose loved one died from substance abuse or addiction. They also provide online and in person support groups throughout the country.

<http://www.overdoseday.com/> International Overdose Awareness Day is an annual global event to raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of drug related deaths. Acknowledging the grief felt by families and friends, Overdose Day spreads the message that the tragedy of overdose is preventable.

<http://www.survivorresources.org/> Restoring Hope, Reclaiming Life is their focus. Survivors Resources is a non-profit organization that offers support groups, crisis response, grief counseling and other services for families of victims of death due to homicide, suicide, accidental overdose or violent deaths.

Books:

- *When A Child Dies From Drugs* by Pat and Russ Wittberger
- *Losing Jonathan* by Robert and Linda Waxler
- *Life After the Death of My Son: What I'm Learning* by Dennis L. Apple
- *One Way Ticket: Our Son's Addiction to Heroin* by Rita Lowenthal

Grief includes all kinds of feelings. If you feel overwhelmed with emotion, trust the grief process and give yourself permission to be with all your feelings. Know that there are others out there who feel the same. And, there are counselors and support groups that will welcome and support you. You do not have to grieve alone.



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