

Losing a Loved One to Overdose



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If you or a friend have lost a loved one to an overdose, the following information will help in understanding the onset of grief and offer ways to self-care and respond to those around you.



LOSING A LOVED ONE TO DRUG OVERDOSE

If you have experienced the death of a loved one from accidental drug overdose, your reactions and emotions may be unlike anything you have ever experienced! You are not only left with the devastation of the loss, but there may also be feelings of veiled guilt, shame, discomfort or anger. Society treats this death in a much different manner than death from any other natural cause, often creating a stigma difficult for you to navigate and uncomfortable for others. It is important for you to know that the following responses are common in, what for you, may feel like an abnormal and uncharted situation. Even if you have experienced some of these, please know that the intensity and duration often change and lessen over time. We have also included some tips to better cope and move forward through the pain of your loss.



Common Reactions



- Sadness over not having the chance to say “goodbye”
- Helpless that you could not protect your loved one
- Fear of judgement from others regarding you, your family or your deceased loved one
- Disappointment in yourself for not having a sixth sense or picking up on clues
- Struggling with unanswered questions and the need to understand how this happened
- Mood changes of sadness, anxiety, irritability or crying spells
- Impatience while waiting for toxicology or police reports if these were initiated
- Anger at your loved one, or others who may have played a part in their addiction

Common Reactions



- Needing to place blame ~ either on yourself, someone else or your deceased loved one
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, fear you are “going crazy”
- Frustration over the lack of support and understanding from others about addiction
- The need to have your loved one remembered for the good in him/her and not the way he/she died
- Difficulty sleeping, having intense dreams, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks about the deceased or circumstances at time of death
- Feeling isolated from supports and possibly lacking places to talk about your grief
- Fear of this happening to others you care about

What May Help



- Acknowledge the reality of the circumstances of this death. This helps to address complicated feelings and reactions to your loss which may open doors to healing for you and others who have experienced the same type of loss. Each voice expressed begins to change the stigma of death by overdose and decreases the vicious cycle of isolation.
- Don't define your loved one by his/her addiction. The way your loved one died does not take away from the fact that he/she was a person who was valued and loved. A person who deserves to be remembered and grieved. Begin to consider ways to continue this legacy of love by finding positive ways to remember your loved one.
- Find healthy ways of acknowledging and expressing your feelings.
- Understand addiction. Learning about this disease may help you to know that you are powerless over addiction. All the money and love in the world cannot beat addiction.
- Understanding the struggle your loved one had may decrease feelings of guilt rather than having them spiral into unhealthy and untruthful proportions.

What May Help



- Understanding the struggle your loved one had may decrease feelings of guilt rather than having them spiral into unhealthy and untruthful proportions.
- Help others understand and know what is NOT helpful in regards to their comments and actions. Educate them if they are willing to learn, and if not, you have the right to limit your interaction with them and focus on healthy and positive supports.
- Research what specific resources are available in the area of addiction loss. Some of the ones below may help you feel less alone and provide a safe place to express your feelings.
- Seek professional help from a therapist or your doctor for reactions that persist and may interfere with functioning.

One Nation Overdosed: How Children Cope With A Parent's Addiction | NBC Nightly News



NBC News

Ohio teen Victoria Brinkman grew up with a heroin-addicted mother who struggled to take care of her. Now, she wants to spread awareness about drug abuse to help others.

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Talking with children and teens about serious illness and death are uncomfortable topics for all adults to approach. Having frank conversations with them about death due to an overdose is even more challenging. It's natural to want to protect children, however withholding the truth is exactly what you should not do when it comes to a drug overdose death.

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Being able to talk openly and honestly with children about a difficult topic such as this one actually builds a foundation of trust. If you convey the desire to be truthful, they are far more likely to come to you with future questions and concerns. Children and teens look up to the adults around them and turn to them as models for how to behave and cope with difficult situations. They want, need and deserve to know what happened, and it's far better to hear it from an adult they are close to than through someone else or by social media. In most cases they usually don't need to know all the details you might know. But they need to be told the basic facts because if they are not, they will fill in the gaps with something worse. What they imagine will be worse than the truth.

~ Cook, M. A., & CPC, F. (2018). Understanding Grief After an Overdose Death

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Talk about how the person died, why they died, and how this is impacting you. Initiate the conversation. This may be difficult for you to do and, if so, perhaps start with a question. “What have you been thinking about Uncle John’s death?” conveys you are interested in, and care about, how this is impacting them. Ask what they have heard. Talk about your surprise (if appropriate) and your sadness. Think about the developmental age of the child or teen when considering how to explain the death. Use short, simple sentences. You are helping them begin to understand and adjust to the reality of what has happened. Although they need to be told the truth about the cause of death, focus on how it is impacting them. This is one of those times you have the opportunity to help them realize that life can be difficult but they are not alone, you will always be with them to help them through it.

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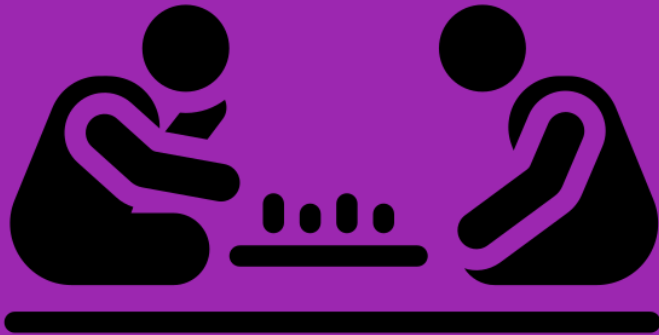
Talk about the feelings of sadness, grief, perhaps anger or guilt. Listen for the questions behind their questions; let that be your guide for what to say and how to say it. Part of addiction's control is the secretive nature of it. Addicts keep it hidden, families don't talk about it. By being open about the cause of death and talking about it with children you are helping to break down the secrecy. Emphasize to children and teens that you don't want them to keep secrets about addiction in themselves or others from you and you can use this opportunity for discussion.

Three to five year olds



Children this age cannot grasp the permanence of death so may ask the same questions repeatedly. They won't understand but they will react to the emotions around them. "I have some sad news. Uncle John died last night. Died means his body doesn't work anymore. He can't breathe, he is not alive like he used to be. We are all feeling very sad." If they were close to the person who died, expect regressive behaviors such as separation anxiety, sleeping problems, an increase in clinging or crying behaviors.

Six to eight year olds



Six year olds may still view death as reversible, so watch for magical thinking. Your child might ask “I know you said Uncle John died, but will he be here for Thanksgiving?” Children this age express feelings through behavior. The concept of cause and effect is developing and there is some understanding of what death involves, so this may result in a fear of death. Reassurance and a sense of security are important. “I am very sad and need to talk with you about something. Last night Uncle John died because he took too many pills. He’s been having trouble taking too many pills and this time he took so many it caused his heart to stop working. It’s so hard to believe he’s gone and we are all very sad. I think you will have more questions over the next few days and I want you to come ask me whatever questions you have at any time. How are you feeling about this news?”

~ Cook, M. A., & CPC, F. (2018). Understanding Grief After an Overdose Death

Nine to twelve year olds



Life is often seen in a black and white manner. There is a tendency to intellectualize and act as if it doesn't matter. A fear of abandonment keeps them on this cognitive level, so stress your ongoing support and availability to them. Children this age may exhibit either emotional avoidance or emotional outbursts that are followed by feelings of embarrassment. "I am very sad and need to talk with you about something. Last night Uncle Johnny was found dead in his apartment of a drug overdose. He has been struggling with addiction to pain pills for a while – we thought he was doing better so that's making it all the harder to grasp that he's gone. I think you will have more questions over the next few days and I want you to come ask me whatever questions you have, at any time. How are you feeling about this news?"

Thirteen to eighteen year olds



Teens are able to understand, so need to be told, almost as much as you know. Their peers are using drugs and probably know more than you think they know. Create an open environment for sharing and asking questions. Talk with them as you would another adult. They need to feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings and have their feelings validated. Talk openly with them about the power of addiction and how seductive it can be.

Similar to many adults, children and teens are left wondering “why” this happened and “what they might have said or done to prevent an overdose death. Understand it is normal if initial reactions of shock and disbelief last several weeks given the sudden nature of the death. If the person who died is not someone they saw on a daily basis, it may be harder to grasp the finality. Explain it is common to feel angry or guilty and that loving a person is not enough to prevent someone from an overdose. They may have been unaware the person had sought help or treatment for addiction. On the other hand, they may have been well aware because they had witnessed their struggle or erratic behavior. Know that the conversation you have with your child or teen is not a one-time conversation. You are laying the groundwork for many future conversations about this death, their reactions and your thoughts. This will give you the opportunity to correct misperceptions or inaccurate information along the way. They will realize you may not have all the answers but you are always ready and willing to hear all their questions. What greater gift can you give than the realization that they are not alone and there are others always there for them to help them with these difficult times in life?



Children's understanding of death at different ages



Children's understanding
of death at different ages

[Child Bereavement UK](#)

A short guidance film from Child Bereavement UK

Child Bereavement UK provides confidential support, information and guidance to individuals, families and professionals throughout the UK. Our Helpline team is available to respond to calls, emails and Live Chat via our website 9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Additional Websites



- www.thefix.com/mothers-lost-children-overdose - The Fix is the world's leading website about addiction and recovery. Their mission is to destigmatize all areas of addiction and mental health matters.
- www.grasphelp.org – GRASP is Grief Recovery After Substance Abuse, 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.

- www.overdoseday.com/tributes - 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.
- 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.
- www.whatsyourgrief.com/-- provides a variety of bracelets, pins, ribbons and stickers in memory of those lost to overdose.
- www.overdoseday.com/product/international-overdose-awareness-day-badge/ Provides a silver badge to show support of International Overdose Awareness Day
- www.broken-no-more.org Provides support and guidance to those who have lost a loved one due to substance abuse.

Additional Resources



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

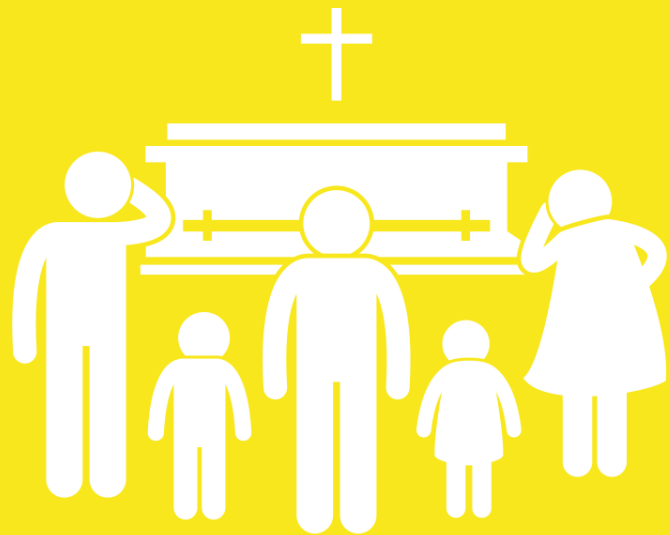
Devastating Losses: How Parents Cope with the Death of Child to Suicide or Drugs by William Feigelman, John Jordan, John McIntosh, Beverly Feigelman

Dark Wine Waters: My Husband of a Thousand Joys & Sorrows, Frances Simone

The Grief Chronicles: A Survivors Manual for Death by Overdose by Marie Minnich

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If you or anyone you know is grieving and would like more resources or talk to someone, please use the contact information below to reach Board Certified Coach [Melissa James](#).



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