



Grieving a Substance-Related Death

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Grieving the death of someone you love is difficult. When someone you love dies from substance-related causes, in addition to the myriad of typical grief responses after a death, there is an added level of complexity due to the nature of the death. When there is a stigma attached to a manner of death it can prevent the survivor from openly talking about their grief, leaving them feeling isolated and alone. Behind the staggering statistics are real people who were loved by their family and friends that must try to sort through the shattered pieces they are left with. Here are some things you should know about surviving after your loved has died from a substance-related death.

Feelings of Guilt, Shame and Blame: The grief after a substance-related death is complex because the death feels like it was “avoidable” or “preventable”. Looking back and seeing all the ways this could have ended differently, or hindsight bias, is very real when a death is viewed by others as preventable. You can’t help but feel as if there was something *else* you could have or should have done to stop this tragedy from happening. You can’t help but wonder ‘if only they would have listened’ or accepted the offers for help, then they would still be here. Some may feel guilty for feeling relief that their loved one’s struggle with addiction is finally over. Some may feel feelings of anger and blame toward others, themselves or even the person who died. It can be hard to talk to others when you have an overwhelming sense of shame over *how* your loved one died. It is important that you take your time in processing the circumstances of your loved one’s death and find a way to come to terms with the fact that no matter how hard we try, there is nothing we can do to change what has happened. It is important to not avoid feeling these difficult emotions, but instead find ways to process them and healthy ways to release them.

Societal stigma and isolation: Sometimes it can feel to survivors that the words “addiction”, “overdose” and “substance-related death” overshadow their special person who died. Society tends to believe that addiction is something that happens to *other* people or only *certain types* of people. The reality is - it can happen to anyone in any family. Society also tends to believe that addiction is a problem that can easily be remedied if the person (or the family) would just *try harder*. The more educated we as a society can be about addiction, the better we will understand the reality individuals and families face. To break down the walls of stigma and shame we need to be able to be honest about it, to talk about it and to *teach others from our own experiences*. It is also important for you not to focus solely on how they died but to remember them as a whole person. Remember: your special person is not defined by how they died, nor are they defined by their addiction!

So many unanswered questions: When a death is sudden, it is followed with unanswered questions that can be difficult to grapple with. These questions start coming the minute you find out that your loved one has died and they really don’t stop until they are either answered, or you find a way to come to terms with them never being answered. And sometimes when you get the answers you are looking for, they don’t always help you in the ways you thought they would. It is important to accept the facts that you do know and to find ways to let go of the questions that will never have answers.

Substance-Related Grief Support: The stigma of having a loved one die from a substance-related death can sometimes prevent survivors from reaching out for support. It is important to note that support looks different for different people. Some are in search of a support group in order to connect with others who understand what they are going through. Some are more comfortable talking one-on-one with a counselor. Others prefer the anonymity of online support groups. There are great resources available all over the internet, including on social media platforms! Consider contacting your local Al-Anon or Nar-Anon chapters. While these are not specific grief groups they are typically very open to people who are grieving the death of a loved one from a substance-related death, and can be a great place to start.

