



When Someone You Know Dies from an Overdose

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Grieving the death of someone you love is difficult. When someone you love dies from an overdose, 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. When my brother died from an overdose in 2016, I certainly felt this way but I quickly realized I was not. The year my brother died, there were 63,600 overdose deaths in the United States alone. Someone dies of an overdose every 14 minutes and the numbers of overdose deaths continues to climb each year. Behind the staggering statistics are real people, like my brother, who were loved by their family and friends that are left 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 an overdose.

Feelings of Guilt and Shame: The grief after an overdose death is complex because the death feels like it was avoidable or 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 offer 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. 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 ones death and find a way to accept that there is nothing we can do to change what happened. It is important to not avoid feeling these difficult emotions but instead find ways to process them and healthy ways to release them.

So many unanswered questions: When a death is sudden it is followed with unanswered questions which 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 come to terms with the facts that you do know and to find a way to let go of the questions that will never have answers.

Not knowing the exact date of death: For a lot of families, including my own, the date of death may be in question. Rather than a single date, it may be more of a period of time spanning from when the person was last seen/heard from to when their body was found. While the death certificate will note the date of death as the day they were found, survivors may feel that another day feels more like the actual date of death to them. While from the outside it may seem odd to focus so much on the date of death, to the survivors it holds special significance and deserves to be recognized. Do what feels right to you. For my family, it brought us peace to be able to answer this otherwise unanswered question ourselves. You may find that all the days within a specific timeframe are significant to you and become the "anniversary of the death" and that is okay, too. *Do what feels right for you.*



Societal stigma and isolation: Sometimes it can feel to survivors that the words “addiction” and “overdose” 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, when 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 can understand the difficulties and complications involved for individuals and families. 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!

Overdose Death Support: The stigma of having a loved one die from an overdose can 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 people are more comfortable talking one-on-one with a counselor or therapist. Others prefer the anonymity of online support groups from the comfort of their own homes. Thankfully there are great resources available for those whose loved ones died from overdoses all over the internet. Facebook even has some specific support group pages for people to connect to. 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 an overdose, and can be great resources.

Online resources:

GRASP (Grief Recovery After Substance Passing) – www.grasphelp.org

Broken No More – www.broken-no-more.org

Mom’s Tell – www.momstell.org

Explaining an overdose death to a child: It is important to be honest when talking with children about any death. When the death is sudden and traumatic, sometimes our instinct is to shield them from the reality and truth about the situation. However, it is vitally important that you not lie to the child. Kids need to know the facts and truth about the death of someone they love before they can truly begin to grieve. If a child is not told the truth at the outset, eventually the truth WILL be discovered – from the media, a neighbor, a classmate...better it first come from a caring adult in that child’s life. Children deserve to have the grown-ups in their lives be honest with them rather than confuse them with half-truths or lies.

- ♥ It is important to use age-appropriate language. Start with a basic explanation. One way you can explain an overdose is, “Daddy died from an overdose. When we say that someone has died it means their body has stopped working. An overdose is when someone takes too much medicine or the wrong medicine and it makes their body stop working. Does that make sense?”
- ♥ Answer their questions as openly and honestly as possible. The amount of information should be determined by their age and understanding. Keep it simple and short, then provide additional information as they ask questions. Let them know it’s okay to ask questions! When children don’t have their questions answered, they will come up with their own answers often much more scary than the truth.
- ♥ Sometimes adults worry that telling a child the truth about the cause of a loved one’s death might diminish the love the child felt toward that person. However, if we have honestly explained the facts of the cause of death to the child, we can easily and naturally move forward from there to the important task of *honoring* that person’s life for and with the child. **The meaning of one’s life is never solely defined by the moment of his or her death.** A great thing to do with children is to share good memories and talk about things that you could do to honor the person’s life. Children have wonderful ideas for how to honor life – explore them together!