



# Helping Yourself Heal When Someone You Care About Dies of a Drug Overdose

by **Center for Loss** | Jan 12, 2017 | by **Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.**

A friend or family member has died of a drug overdose. Death and grief are always hard, but when someone dies from drug use, understanding your feelings and knowing what to think and say about the death can be especially difficult. This article offers compassionate guidance for coping with your own grief as well as helping others affected by the loss.

## Addiction and the opioid epidemic

People of all backgrounds and socioeconomic levels are affected by addiction. Addiction is a recognized disease in which the pleasure centers of the brain get taken over by the need for the drug. Addicts cannot control their behavior.

In the United States today, the majority of drug overdose deaths involve an opioid, such as prescription painkillers or heroin. About two and a half million people are addicted to these drugs, and nearly 100 people die each day from an overdose. In fact, opioid use and overdose trends have grown so bad that the Department of Health & Human Services has labeled the problem an epidemic.

You are not alone. Millions of families and friends have lost a loved one to drug use. This doesn't make the death of the unique person you cared about any less tragic. It does mean that there are resources to help you and many people who may be able to understand and support you.

## Coping with the stigma

Even though addiction is a disease that can affect anyone, there is still a social stigma associated with drug overdose deaths. For you, a person who has lost someone special, this can seem doubly unfair. Not only has someone you cared about died, but others may avoid you or make you feel ashamed about the death.

Remind yourself that your friend or family member died of a common, deadly disease. Learn more about opioid use and how it's affecting so many. Reach out to others impacted by overdose death. Talk openly about what happened. Shining a light of openness and empathy on overdose deaths will help you and others heal.

## A complicated grief

Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you care about dies. Your grief will naturally be complicated by the cause of this death.

If the person who died was young and otherwise healthy, that fact will affect your grief. We typically feel a sense of injustice and a stolen future whenever a young person dies.

We also often feel anger when deaths are caused by behaviors. You might be mad at the person who overdosed, at others whom you perceive enabled the behavior (such as a drug dealer), or at medical staff or police who may have been involved.

You might also feel guilty that you weren't able to help the person stop using drugs before it was too late—even though the behavior was outside your control.



Whatever your complicated thoughts and feelings may be, your task now is to express them in healthy ways.

### **Mourning the death**

While grief is what you feel on the inside, mourning is what you do when you express your grief on the outside. Crying is mourning. Attending the funeral is mourning. Talking to others about the death is mourning.

Part of your mourning will be about the cause of the death. Over time, the larger part of your mourning will be about the loss of a special, unique person who was loved by you and others. Openly and actively discussing all your thoughts and feelings about this death will help you cope with the stigma and eventually heal. Mourning helps you acknowledge the reality of the death, embrace the pain of the loss, remember the person who died, consider the meaning of the person's death, and receive support from others.

Do not let the stigma of the death keep you from mourning fully. Talking about drug overdose and your particular loss will help our society grow more compassionate and work toward solutions.

### **Learn about resources**

Your community may have resources for people grieving an overdose death. Call your local hospital, health department, or funeral home to find out more about support groups, counselors, and volunteer opportunities. Nothing is better than face-to-face, personal contact with others who walked the same walk.

There are also many resources online. Google "grief support overdose" and you'll find a number of websites and forums dedicated to helping mourners like you. Reading others' stories and sharing your own is often a great source of comfort, validation, expression, and healing.

### **Take good care of yourself**

As you grieve this death, remember to practice good self-care. Think of yourself in emotional intensive care. Just as people who are severely physically injured need around-the-clock attention, you need and deserve excellent care for your psychic injury.

Rest often. Eat healthy foods. Drink ample water. De-stress your life as much as possible. Exercise gently but regularly. Spend time with people who care about you. Express your grief whenever you're feeling it.

### **Meet your spiritual needs**

Most of all, grief is a spiritual journey. You will naturally have questions about why this death had to happen now, and in this way, and you might find yourself wondering about the purpose and meaning of life in general. If you believe in God, you may find solace in your faith, or you may be angry at a God who could let this happen.

All of these spiritual responses are normal. Making time each day to feed your spirit will help. Pray, meditate, visit a place of worship, go for a walk in the woods, journal about your spiritual struggle, or speak with a spiritual leader. All of these practices are forms of mourning, and all will help experience your natural grief and move toward healing.



### Explaining this death to children

Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve and mourn. Children affected by an overdose death deserve our compassion, our presence, and our honesty. Never lie to kids or keep difficult truths from them in an effort to protect them.

Start from the child's place of understanding. Listen to and answer questions with words and ideas that are appropriate to the child's age and unique development.

If the child was unaware of the person's habit, you will probably first need to explain drug use and the disease of addiction.

Remember that young children, especially, are literal thinkers. If you tell them only that medicine killed the person, for example, they might end up being afraid to take their own medicine the next time they're sick.

Young children are also prone to magical thinking. For instance, they sometimes think that something they thought or did may have caused the death. Reassure them that it wasn't their fault.

Children, too, often sense the stigma of an overdose death. You can help by explaining that addiction is an illness and talking about thoughts and feelings openly and without judgment. Also, it's never too early to start teaching children about the dangers of drug use.

Children typically grieve in small doses. They may upset one moment and playing the next. This is normal. Give them brief, frequent opportunities to ask questions or play out concerns (such as drawing or role playing). Be present and ready to talk and offer support. Express your own grief when it arises.