



Needs While Grieving an Overdose Death

One family every 14 minutes begins the process of enduring the terrible pain of an overdose death. There is all the usual pain of grieving, and then there is the guilt, shame, blame, isolation, fear, and other unique and challenging emotions that come with this grief. All of these will need to be faced and addressed in some way and it takes time. It isn't easy. There is no one answer or one way to grieve an overdose death, so you will need to find what works for you.

Face the reality of the circumstances of the death.

Denying the role of substances in our loved ones' deaths is not surprising, when can be so much stigma and blame. Finding your own way to face the role of drugs in the loss, either to yourself and/or to others, is an important part of grieving an overdose lost. We often deny to ourselves and/or to other people the role of drug on the death because it feels easier that way. In the long term we need to be honest with ourselves about circumstances of the loss in order to address any complicated feelings around those circumstances.

If you need a push, commit to accepting the circumstances of the death in honor of International Overdose Awareness Day on August 31st. Decide what is right for you, but one possibility is to leave a tribute to the person who died due to an overdose on the International Overdose Awareness Day website. There are hundreds of thousands of incredible people whose lives have been lost to overdose. Their addiction and their overdose do not change the fact that they were people we loved, people we remember, and people we grieve. Share who they were and how they died; each voice begins to change the stigma, blame, isolation, and shame; each voice remembers someone loved and deeply missed. The simple act of posting a tribute on the site is an acknowledgement of the circumstances of the loss and a step toward accepting the reality of the nature of the loss. This is one of many small things you can do to begin the process of accepting and acknowledging the death as an overdose death.

Speak up.

This doesn't have to be verbally but find some way that you will express the emotions that come with addiction and drug-related death. Do you need to yell from the rooftops? No. You may not even be ready to talk about it at all. Maybe you will find writing, art, music, or photography are a better form of expression for you. Maybe you will blog about it! But one way or the other, start working toward a place where you can express your feelings about the addiction and overdose.

Though finding a means of expression is about you, keep in mind that it will also help others. It is our collective silence that keeps us in this vicious cycle of feeling alone and maintaining stigma. I remember the first time someone told me they had someone in their family suffering from a heroin addiction. It was a co-worker at a job I had many years ago. She said it in passing, like she had no reason to be ashamed. Up until that moment I thought everyone kept addiction in their family a secret. More accurately, I assumed that no one else I knew was experiencing addiction in their family! I remember telling her my own story and feeling an indescribable sense of relief to know that I was not alone; my family was not alone. I decided from that moment on that I would stop hiding and lying about addiction, because if I could bring one other person that same sense of relief and connection it was worth the shame and judgment I feared. Will this kind of open discussion be right for everyone?



No, but it works for me and I am overwhelmed with the number of people I learn have been touched by addiction and overdose just by being open and honest about it.

Understand Addiction

Most of us will always have some feelings of guilt and self-blame for the overdose deaths, and that is okay. The difference in my feelings now from many years ago around overdose is that I have a far better understanding of addiction. I have accepted that I am powerless over someone else's addiction. Though I shudder at every celebrity overdose death, it reminds me that all the money and love in the world still cannot always beat addiction. Does that belief dissolve all my guilt? Nope. Does it get rid of all the "what ifs"? Absolutely not. Does it change the fact that I believe that love and quality treatment can be life changing for someone suffering from addiction? No way. Grief and guilt are not rational, so we cannot reason them away. But this deeper understanding of addiction does help to keep my guilt in a normal, manageable, range rather than spiraling, obsessing, or becoming consumed by anxiety. It has helped me realize that much blame around addiction and overdose is misplaced. It has helped me feel empowered when I talk to others and address the myths and misconceptions about addiction and overdose.

Stand-up for Yourself

As Feigleman et al (2011) suggest, "openly challeng[ing] unhelpful but well-intentioned efforts among intimate associates may help these survivors to establish more supportive environments for their healing among their families and friends". We have this tendency to shy away from telling people when their well-intentioned comments are not helpful. We let the comments slide, though we may ruminate about them later. If you are not feeling supported by the comments of friends and family, tell them! They may not realize that their well-intentioned words or actions are not helpful.

Avoid People Who Aren't Helping

Some friends and family members will continue to be part of the problem, even after you talk to them about it. They may imply an overdose death is some sort of lesser death, or that the life of someone suffering addiction is somehow less worthy of mourning. If you give them feedback, stand-up for yourself, ask them for the kinds of support you need and they continue to cause your more harm than support, avoid them. Seriously. It is okay to give yourself permission to get some space from those people. Depending on your relationship with that person you may want or need to reintroduce them into your life in the future, but for now you need to focus on being surrounded by people who are supporting you in your grief.

Learn About Specific Resources

Though it may feel like you are all alone, there are resources specifically for people grieving substance deaths:

GRASP (Grief Recovery After Substance Passing) has groups that meet around the country and is specifically for those grieving an overdose death.

Broken No More has forums, articles, and resources for those grieving substance abuse deaths, and also works to change the stigma around addiction. <http://broken-no-more.org/>



Mom's Tell provides information regarding substance abuse treatment, recovery, education, prevention legislation and policy issues in memory of the many lives lost to substance abuse. It was founded by group of moms who lost children to overdose and has been active for 15 years.

Al-anon and Nar-anon are family support groups for family members of those suffering from alcoholism or addiction. Though they are not grief groups, many people find support in these groups following drug and alcohol deaths. Though each group that meets will be different, my experience with these groups is that they are very open and supportive of those who lost someone to overdose.

Local Support Groups a google search in your area or calls around to some hospices may help you locate drug-related death support groups in your area. Lory's Place offers a Substance Related Loss group.

Do All the Other Important Grief Stuff

Yes, overdose grief has some unique challenges to face, but it is also grief. Find ways to integrate your loss that work for you. It may mean seeking professional help, it may mean journaling, using creative outlets, assessing your self-care, seeking help from your support system, or learning to better understand your grief. There are countless suggestions on our website, as well as around the web. Keep reading, learning, and connecting. Take it one day at a time.

Adapted from article found at: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/grief-of-an-overdose-death-part-2/>