



GRIEF AFTER A DEATH FROM SUBSTANCE USE

Effects of addiction: Coping with a person's substance use while they are struggling with addiction may influence what happens to the bereaved after a death occurs:

- Dynamics of addiction: Relationships can be affected by shifting roles, defense mechanisms, crises, intense emotions, a negative world view, unmanageable behavior, and other family dynamics.
- Caregiver effects: Caring for a person at risk of overdose can bring multiple losses to caregivers (e.g., loss of hope, loss of security, loss of intimacy), not unlike the losses that sometimes result from caring for a terminally ill person.
- Ambiguous loss: Sometimes, a person using substances is utterly absent psychologically or physically in a way that resembles an actual death, for example, when a person is estranged from the family or their whereabouts is unknown.

Key questions: After someone dies from substance use, bereaved people's struggles with three commonly asked questions may affect their experience of grief:

- "Why did my person (child, spouse, sibling, etc.) die from substance use?"
- "Did my person intend to die?"
- "Could my person's death have been prevented?"

Key emotions: A death from substance use can cause survivors to experience troublesome thoughts and strong feelings:

- Shock
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Anger
- Blame
- Guilt
- Shame
- Abandonment
- Rejection
- Failure
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Unfairness
- Fear
- Relief

Overarching issues: When someone dies from substance use, several factors commonly come into play that can have a profound impact on the bereaved:

- Stigma: Negative judgments about the character of people affected by substance use can cause survivors to be mistreated or isolated—and even *disenfranchised*.
- Trauma: Survivors may experience trauma from being involved in situations ranging from resuscitation attempts to being exposed to media coverage of the death. The trauma experienced by the person who died can also affect the bereaved.

"When somebody says, 'My son died,' the natural follow-up question almost universally is 'What happened?' — and the answer is, 'My son died of a heroin overdose.' Well, all of the oxygen can go right out of the room. People can react very badly to that even if it's silently — so if you just extrapolate that over every interaction a bereaved person has ... the end outcome is that it isolates them ... and it just makes them feel that people are treating them like they're dirty." (Franklin Cook, Peer Grief Helper)