

Grieving After Overdose Death

**You're not alone.
We're here to support.**

There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

After the death of a loved one, the intensity of your emotions can shift and change over time, as the weight of your grief lessens. However, this sudden death can lead to more complicated grief as it is often impacted by: Social stigma, personal shame you may be experiencing, your relationship with the person, your personal values/beliefs, if you were present, and/or if you attempted life-saving techniques.

Types of grief that you may experience after a loved one dies from an overdose are:



Complicated Grief

The initial intensity of grief remains consistent, slowing, or halting a person's healing. **Intense feelings of grief for longer than 6 months** after the death occurred **or** the bereaved is experiencing extreme difficulties with day-to-day functioning (task completion) that is negatively impacting their health and/or safety.



Ambiguous Grief

This form of grief may have been experienced while your loved one was still living and/or after they died.

- 1. Ambiguous grief with no death:** When your loved one no longer appears or presents as the person you had known them to be (personality has changed – emotions, behaviour, and/or thinking). This form of loss can occur while a loved one is struggling with a substance use disorder.
- 2. Ambiguous grief after death:** When a death occurs but information surrounding the death is limited, or the majority of information remains unknown.



Disenfranchised Grief

"Socially Unspeakable Losses" - (W. Worden)

In this grief, your loved one's cause of death is/may be viewed by others through a judgment/stigma-based lens.

You may feel that your grief/loss is not validated by those in your natural support systems or the larger community.

Factors that can impact your grief

- **Type of relationship with the deceased:** Family member, parent, spouse, friend, coworker, neighbour, or acquaintance.
- **Age of the deceased:** Youth, young adult, adult.
- **Nature of the relationship you had:**
 - You were aware of substance use **vs.** you were unaware of use.
 - The relationship was injured and/or hostile (harmful/hurtful) because of substance use.
 - Close or connected **vs.** acquaintance or strained.
 - Supportive **vs.** co-dependent (supporter always meets the wants/needs of the other, even at the risk of their own well-being).
- **Number of losses you have already experienced:** *Person(s):* Cases of multiple deaths in a short period of time or loss of other relationships. *Things:* Loss of job, loss of home, etc.
- **Personal and community beliefs and values:** Can influence your understanding of mental health concerns and substance use/disorders. This can either encourage or negatively impact your comfort in publicly discussing overdose death and expressing your grief publicly. By allowing yourself to express what you are feeling and talk openly about your loved one's death, you are engaging in healthy grieving.





Social

When a loved one's death is caused by an overdose, you may feel that others are judging you, your family, and/or your loved one. Often this judgment comes from a lack of understanding about mental health concerns and the stigma surrounding addictions and substance use. You may feel that your grief is not recognized or understood by others, causing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Coping strategies:

- Talk with trusted individuals.
- Allow friends and family to support you, and accept invitations to spend time together.
- Maintain a healthy balance and be OK with saying “no” when necessary.
- Protect yourself by walking away from judgmental comments.
- If you cannot connect with your natural supports, reach out to professionals for help.
- Connect with overdose-related grief support groups/programs.



Emotions

You will feel a range of emotions at different intensity levels, and your feelings may differ from what other grievers are experiencing - this is OK. Strong emotions may seem to come from nowhere and may feel uncontrollable or overwhelming at first. Allowing yourself to acknowledge and express your feelings (in a safe way) is how you begin to heal. This process cannot be rushed. Remember, this is your process, and this is your healing.



Shock

Shock is an initial response and typically subsides over time.

Coping strategies:

- Refrain from making large/major decisions (if possible).
- Practice self-compassion.
- Give yourself time.



Anger

Anger is a typical grief reaction and plays a vital role at different times during your grief process. Anger can provide a sense of control, enhance motivation and push you to complete tasks. However, you may find that your anger is towards others (blame). Therefore, it is important to release anger in a way that is safe for you and others.

Coping strategies:

- Physical exercise.

- Tensing and releasing large muscle groups.
- Deep controlled breathing.
- Screaming outdoors or singing loudly when you are on your own (not directly at someone).
- Be aware of what your anger is telling you in the moment: Take time and step away (give yourself breaks).



Guilt

Guilt occurs when you believe you are responsible for events or interactions that have caused hurt or pain to someone else.

You may be experiencing intense feelings of guilt for:

- Things said or not said/things done or not done.
- Questioning if the overdose was accidental or intentional.
- Feeling that in some way you may have been able to prevent the death of your loved one.

Guilt during grief can also be “maladaptive guilt,” meaning your guilt does not match the situation, as you did not do anything to purposefully cause harm or pain to your loved one.

To manage guilt, allow yourself to remember that:

- You cannot control every situation.
 - You were not in control of your loved one's substance use.
 - You were not in control of all the situations that led to substance use or disorder.
 - You were not in control of their use that day.
- It is OK and was necessary at times to set limits and boundaries with your loved one. Setting boundaries was a way to support your own wellness and mental health.
- Remind yourself of everything you did for and said to your loved one.

Feelings of guilt can also occur when a person has been involved in their loved one's substance use.

In situations such as:

- Exposing them to substances at a young age.
- Introducing them to substances.
- Using substances with them.
- Financially supporting substance use (as a way to provide safety or reduce conflict).

If this is your guilt, think about how to use the discomfort of guilt to grow and make changes:

- Reach out to family support groups to share your experiences and support others in the community (when you are ready - do not rush).



Relief

Relief after a loved one dies can be extremely confusing and at times prompt feelings of guilt. Don't fault yourself for your moments of relief, give yourself permission to feel it.

Situations that may prompt relief:

- You may find that the amount of sleep or rest (without worry) you are able to get at night is increasing.
- You may feel relieved that you no longer have to worry about your loved one's safety.
- You may find that you are feeling relieved that your loved one is no longer suffering from their addiction/substance use disorder.



Sadness

Sadness can occur without warning and feel intense at times.

Coping strategies:

- Give yourself permission to cry.
- Take time to care for yourself.
- Allow yourself to express your sadness through:
 - Mourning: Use music or other memory-linking activities to encourage mourning.
 - Connecting: Write letters to your loved one who died; talk out loud to them.
- Reach out to others: To just be in the same physical space, or to talk about your loved one and your sadness.



Worry, Fear, Anxiety

You may question if you will feel “normal” again, feeling preoccupied with thoughts related to your loved one's death. You may find yourself worrying about your loved one during their final moments or worrying about your future. As a result, you might be tempted to avoid or stop yourself from thinking about anxiety-provoking worries. Remember, discomfort increases when we do not allow our minds to face our fears.

Coping strategies:

- Write down or talk about your fears with others.
- Information seeking: When you are ready, speak to those who have accurate information about your loved one's death (i.e., emergency responders, coroner, or medical professionals that may have been involved).

- Review the available information about the death or your current situation, and allow yourself to explore the likelihood of your worries coming to life (based on known facts and not emotions).
- Ask questions: Talk your questions out with a trusted person; begin your work towards accepting that you may not find the answers you are looking for.
- Accept invitations from trusted family and friends. You don't have to interact for long periods of time if you do not want to, but give yourself the opportunity to challenge the desire to withdraw from others.
- Take time in your day to remember to breathe deeply. During grief, our breathing can be impacted. Taking moments in the day to focus on deep breaths will help you reconnect with yourself and feel grounded in the moment.

Grief is a personal journey for each individual, and although there is no set timeline for grief, if you or someone you know is struggling, it is important to reach out to others for help.

If support cannot be found within your personal network of family or friends, you might find that you can relate better to others who share similar experiences.

No one should have to grieve alone.



We're a part of your story. Because everyone needs support.

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