

HIGHMARK

CARING PLACE 

finding hope in grief

After an
overdose death

Breaking silence, finding support



Healing through connection

Losing someone to an overdose is a profoundly painful and complex kind of grief. The stigma surrounding overdose can make your loss even harder, adding layers of isolation and misunderstanding.

You may have already carried the pain of the disease long before your loved one's death.

It's important to remember that addiction is a disease, not a weakness. Healing begins with connection. A supportive community can help carry you through.



Reframing self-talk

Try to frame this crisis in gentle language, first to yourself. Then you can be more helpful communicating with your family, especially children.

Hurtful

" I'm a failure."

" He was an addict."

" They were so selfish."

" They were too weak."

" She died a disgrace."

Helpful

" I helped as much as anyone could."

" He struggled with substance use."

" They were in tons of pain."

"Addiction is an overpowering illness."

" We can discuss and honor her life."

Talking and listening to children

Families who've had an overdose loss often struggle with whether or not it's ok to tell children the true cause of death. When you're ready to talk about what happened, start with a simple explanation. Use language at your child's level. Then let their questions guide what else to share.

Avoid language like "passed away" or "went to sleep," which can confuse a child.

You might say:

Your mom died last night. Her liver stopped working from drinking more alcohol than was safe for her body.

I have very sad news. Your brother died last night from an overdose of a drug. We don't know if he took too much on purpose or by accident.

Sharing with people who understand can be a relief. The Caring Place exists to support you in times like this. We offer community space, grieving groups, and referrals.





Hard feelings and painful questions

Some of the questions adults ask themselves are the same ones that come from children. They're questions that may linger for a lifetime. These feelings and questions often come up:

Anger. How could they do this to us?

Guilt. What could we have done to save them?

Blame. Why did their friends have to drag them down?

Shame. How can we face the world after this?

It's important to understand that people who die from addiction-related diseases weren't trying to hurt you. Creating a safe space to share these thoughts, even when there are no easy answers, can be a powerful step toward healing.

More resources

When there's been an overdose death, see our conversation guide:



For more information about handling questions from kids, see the brochure, "Facing Big Questions Together."

Eluna
elunanetwork.org

Substance Abuse and
Mental Health Services Administration
samhsa.org

Betty Ford Foundation
hazeldenbettyford.org

Grief Recovery After a
Substance Passing (GRASP)
grasphehelp.org



Helping grieving children and families heal over a lifetime

Our mission is to create a world of compassionate communities where all people can find hope and healing after the death of a loved one. We provide grief support for families and individuals of all ages through peer groups, education, and advocacy.

Where to find us

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