

# PATHWAYS CENTER

## *for* GRIEF & LOSS

### **LOSING A LOVED ONE TO DRUG OVERDOSE**

If you have experienced the death of a loved one from accidental drug overdose, your reactions and emotions may be unlike anything you have ever experienced! You are not only left with the devastation of the loss, but there may also be feelings of veiled guilt, shame, discomfort or anger. Society treats this death in a much different manner than death from any other natural cause, often creating a stigma difficult for you to navigate and uncomfortable for others. It is important for you to know that the following responses are common in, what for you, may feel like an abnormal and uncharted situation. Even if you have experienced some of these, please know that the intensity and duration often change and lessen over time. We have also included some tips to better cope and move forward through the pain of your loss.

#### **Common Reactions:**

- Sadness over not having the chance to say “goodbye”
- Helpless that you could not protect your loved one
- Fear of judgement from others regarding you, your family or your deceased loved one
- Disappointment in yourself for not having a sixth sense or picking up on clues
- Struggling with unanswered questions and the need to understand how this happened
- Mood changes of sadness, anxiety, irritability or crying spells
- Impatience while waiting for toxicology or police reports if these were initiated
- Anger at your loved one, or others who may have played a part in their addiction
- Needing to place blame ~ either on yourself, someone else or your deceased loved one
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, fear you are “going crazy”
- Frustration over the lack of support and understanding from others about addiction
- The need to have your loved one remembered for the good in him/her and not the way he/she died
- Difficulty sleeping, having intense dreams, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks about the deceased or circumstances at time of death
- Feeling isolated from supports and possibly lacking places to talk about your grief
- Fear of this happening to others you care about

#### **What May Help:**

- Acknowledge the reality of the circumstances of this death. This helps to address complicated feelings and reactions to your loss which may open doors to healing for you and others who have experienced the same type of loss. Each voice expressed begins to change the stigma of death by overdose and decreases the vicious cycle of isolation.
- Don't define your loved one by his/her addiction. The way your loved one died does not take away from the fact that he/she was a person who was valued and loved. A person who deserves to be remembered and grieved. Begin to consider ways to continue this legacy of love by finding positive ways to remember your loved one.

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- Find healthy ways of acknowledging and expressing your feelings.
- Understand addiction. Learning about this disease may help you to know that you are powerless over addiction. All the money and love in the world cannot beat addiction. Understanding the struggle your loved one had may decrease feelings of guilt rather than having them spiral into unhealthy and untruthful proportions.
- Help others understand and know what is NOT helpful in regards to their comments and actions. Educate them if they are willing to learn, and if not, you have the right to limit your interaction with them and focus on healthy and positive supports.
- Research what specific resources are available in the area of addiction loss. Some of the ones below may help you feel less alone and provide a safe place to express your feelings.
- Seek professional help from a therapist or your doctor for reactions that persist and may interfere with functioning.

#### Websites:

- [www.thefix.com/mothers-lost-children-overdose](http://www.thefix.com/mothers-lost-children-overdose) - The Fix is the world's leading website about addiction and recovery. Their mission is to destigmatize all areas of addiction and mental health matters.
- [www.grasphelp.org](http://www.grasphelp.org) – GRASP is Grief Recovery After Substance Abuse, a national resource founded to provide sources of help, compassion and understanding for those whose loved one died from substance abuse or addiction. They also provide online and in person support groups throughout the country.
- [www.overdoseday.com/tributes](http://www.overdoseday.com/tributes) - International Overdose Awareness Day is an annual global event to raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of drug related deaths. Acknowledging the grief felt by families and friends, Overdose Day spreads the message that the tragedy of overdose is preventable.
- [www.survivorresources.org](http://www.survivorresources.org) – Restoring Hope, Reclaiming Life is their focus. Survivors Resources is a non-profit organization that offers support groups, crisis response, grief counseling and other services for families of victims of death due to homicide, suicide, accidental overdose or violent deaths.

#### Books:

- *When A Child Dies From Drugs* by Pat and Russ Wittberger
- *Losing Jonathan* by Robert and Linda Waxler
- *Life After the Death of My Son: What I'm Learning* by Dennis L. Apple
- *One Way Ticket: Our Son's Addiction to Heroin* by Rita Lowenthal