

PATHWAYS CENTER for GRIEF & LOSS

AFTER AN OVERDOSE DEATH: SUGGESTIONS FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND TEENS

Talking with children and teens about serious illness and death are uncomfortable topics for all adults to approach. Having frank conversations with them about death due to an overdose is even more challenging. It's natural to want to protect children, however withholding the truth is exactly what you should not do when it comes to a drug overdose death. Being able to talk openly and honestly with children about a difficult topic such as this one actually builds a foundation of trust. If you convey the desire to be truthful, they are far more likely to come to you with future questions and concerns. Children and teens look up to the adults around them and turn to them as models for how to behave and cope with difficult situations. They want, need and deserve to know what happened, and it's far better to hear it from an adult they are close to than through someone else or by social media. In most cases they usually don't need to know all the details you might know. But they need to be told the basic facts because if they are not, they will fill in the gaps with something worse. What they imagine will be worse than the truth. Talk about how the person died, why they died, and how this is impacting you.

Initiate the conversation. This may be difficult for you to do and, if so, perhaps start with a question. *"What have you been thinking about Uncle John's death?"* conveys you are interested in, and care about, how this is impacting them. Ask what they have heard. Talk about your surprise (if appropriate) and your sadness. Think about the developmental age of the child or teen when considering how to explain the death. Use short, simple sentences. You are helping them begin to understand and adjust to the reality of what has happened. Although they need to be told the truth about the cause of death, focus on how it is impacting them. This is one of those times you have the opportunity to help them realize that life can be difficult but they are not alone, you will always be with them to help them through it. Talk about the feelings of sadness, grief, perhaps anger or guilt. Listen for the questions behind their questions; let that be your guide for what to say and how to say it.

Part of addiction's control is the secretive nature of it. Addicts keep it hidden, families don't talk about it. By being open about the cause of death and talking about it with children you are helping to break down the secrecy. Emphasize to children and teens that you don't want them to keep secrets about addiction in themselves or others from you and you can use this opportunity for discussion.

AGE SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

- **Three to five year olds**

Children this age cannot grasp the permanence of death so may ask the same questions repeatedly. They won't understand but they will react to the emotions around them. *"I have some sad news. Uncle John died last night. Died means his body doesn't work anymore. He can't breathe, he is not alive like he used to be. We are all feeling very sad."* If they were close to the person who died, expect regressive behaviors such as separation anxiety, sleeping problems, an increase in clinging or crying behaviors.

- **Six to eight year olds**

Six year olds may still view death as reversible, so watch for magical thinking. Your child might ask *“I know you said Uncle John died, but will he be here for Thanksgiving?”* Children this age express feelings through behavior. The concept of cause and effect is developing and there is some understanding of what death involves, so this may result in a fear of death. Reassurance and a sense of security are important. *“I am very sad and need to talk with you about something. Last night Uncle John died because he took too many pills. He’s been having trouble taking too many pills and this time he took so many it caused his heart to stop working. It’s so hard to believe he’s gone and we are all very sad. I think you will have more questions over the next few days and I want you to come ask me whatever questions you have at any time. How are you feeling about this news?”*

- **Nine to twelve year olds**

Life is often seen in a black and white manner. There is a tendency to intellectualize and act as if it doesn’t matter. A fear of abandonment keeps them on this cognitive level, so stress your ongoing support and availability to them. Children this age may exhibit either emotional avoidance or emotional outbursts that are followed by feelings of embarrassment. *“I am very sad and need to talk with you about something. Last night Uncle Johnny was found dead in his apartment of a drug overdose. He has been struggling with addiction to pain pills for a while – we thought he was doing better so that’s making it all the harder to grasp that he’s gone. I think you will have more questions over the next few days and I want you to come ask me whatever questions you have, at any time. How are you feeling about this news?”*

- **Thirteen to eighteen year olds**

Teens are able to understand, so need to be told, almost as much as you know. Their peers are using drugs and probably know more than you think they know. Create an open environment for sharing and asking questions. Talk with them as you would another adult. They need to feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings and have their feelings validated. Talk openly with them about the power of addiction and how seductive it can be.

Similar to many adults, children and teens are left wondering “why” this happened and “what they might have said or done to prevent an overdose death. Understand it is normal if initial reactions of shock and disbelief last several weeks given the sudden nature of the death. If the person who died is not someone they saw on a daily basis, it may be harder to grasp the finality. Explain it is common to feel angry or guilty and that loving a person is not enough to prevent someone from an overdose. They may have been unaware the person had sought help or treatment for addiction. On the other hand, they may have been well aware because they had witnessed their struggle or erratic behavior.

Know that the conversation you have with your child or teen is not a one-time conversation. You are laying the groundwork for many future conversations about this death, their reactions and your thoughts. This will give you the opportunity to correct misperceptions or inaccurate information along the way. They will realize you may not have all the answers but you are always ready and willing to hear all their questions. What greater gift can you give than the realization that they are not alone and there are others always there for them to help them with these difficult times in life?

