

Grieving an Overdose Death

As more and more people are touched by addiction, more and more families are left with the grief of an overdose death. Yet the unique experience of grieving an overdose death is still pushed under the rug. It hides out in the shadows. It is veiled in guilt and shame and stigma and discomfort.

Let's talk unique challenges of drug-related deaths.

The Death Feels Avoidable:

Much like suicide grief, there is a complexity in overdose deaths in that people feel like the death was somehow preventable. This can create an array of complicated emotions, many of which can be linked back to this feeling or belief. Many of the feelings below, including guilt, shame, blame, fear, and isolation all in some way can be correlated back to this.

Guilt:

Though guilt can be a component of grief from many types of losses, overdose deaths can present many different types of guilt.

- Friends and family may feel guilt that they could have, or should have, done something to prevent the loss.
- Guilt that the family member suffered from addiction (i.e. a parent, spouse, etc. feeling it is their fault the person who died developed an addiction)
- Guilt if the death brings a sense of relief after years of addiction impacting family and friends.
- Obsession over actions done/not done to support the person who died.

Shame:

There is often a question of the difference between guilt and shame, but it is important to understand the distinction as these can impact someone grieving an overdose death. There are many different ways you will see guilt and shame defined and contrasted against each other. Here we mean this distinction as a contrast between a personal experience vs. a relational experience. Guilt is something we feel within ourselves, based on our own perception that we could or should have done in a certain situation. Shame is something we feel based on our perception that others think we could or should have done something differently. In the case of overdose death, shame can manifest in various ways.

- Shame that the family member suffered from addiction (i.e. a parent believing others think it was their fault or they were a bad parent for having a child who suffers from addiction)
- Shame for enabling the person who died.
- Shame for not doing enough to “help” the person who died.
- Shame for the person who died (feeling that others blame that person for their addiction and/or death, and hence are less worthy of mourning)

Please keep in mind that there is another definition/distinction you will often hear between guilt and shame – one that is actually common in substance abuse and recovery. In this definition people say that guilt is the idea that one did something bad, whereas shame is the belief that one is bad. So, guilt is a feeling about an action and shame is a feeling about the self. Clear as mud?

Though that is a very important distinction to make, it is not the way we are talking about shame here. My experience with the word shame, and with the grief experience that accompanies it, is shame in the relational sense – shame that others are judging us or our loved one.

Blame:

Though there is little research around the grief experience of survivors of overdose deaths, the study by Feigelman, Jordan and Gorman (2011) found a greater incidence of blame among and between parents of children who died of drug related deaths (as well as those who had children die by suicide). This is both self-blame, as well as blame between friends and family members. Though this is the first US research to officially document this, it seems pretty darn intuitive if you have lost anyone to overdose or known people who have. Some common feelings that arise around blame are:

- Blame toward those who used drugs/alcohol with the person who died.
- Self-blame for the person developing an addiction.
- Self-blame for the person's death.
- Blame toward the person who died for their own death.
- Blame toward family members for not preventing the death.
- Obsession over actions done/not done to support the person who died.

In the Feigelman et al (2011) study, a tally of blame comments made to parents showed that 97%+ of blame comments were made in cases of suicide and overdose deaths, in contrast to 2-3% in cases of accidental deaths and 0% in cases of natural deaths. 64% of these comments were blame toward the child who died, with the remaining 36% of the comments blaming the parent. Nearly 50% of parents who lost a child to overdose or suicide reported blame comments being made by one or more of their significant others. It is easier and easier to understand why people don't speak up about addiction and overdose deaths, isn't it?!

Stigma and Isolation:

Though we know addiction touches hundreds of thousands of families each year, the family and friends of those experiencing addiction often suffer in silence due to the feelings of stigma, guilt and shame. When someone dies from overdose this isolation often continues from reluctance to talk about the addiction. This can result in:

- Difficulty accepting the circumstances of the death (denial about drug involvement).
- Reluctance to openly discuss the cause of death.
- Reluctance to participate in support groups or counseling.
- Hesitance to seek support from friends and family members.

In the same Feigelman et al (2011) study, 50% of parents who lost a child to suicide or overdose deaths did not find the support that they expected from their significant others, contributing to feelings of isolation. People say stupid things to us all the time as grievers. Overdose deaths can bring out some of those especially terrible comments that drive us further into isolation. People make us feel this death is not as worthy of grief and mourning as other deaths, which throws it in the complicated category of disenfranchised grief.

Fear and Anxiety:

Addiction is a devastating disease that is difficult to imagine if you have not experienced it within your family, friends, or community. I struggle writing this to even put it into words. It turns family members into strangers. It pins friends and family against one another. It devastates communities. Once someone has lost a family member to addiction anxieties can arise (or increase) and become consuming:

- Fear that other family members will start abusing substances.
- Fear that others who are already using substances will also overdose.
- Fear that others who are in recovery will relapse.

All of these anxieties can lead to mistrust between surviving family members and friends. This anxiety can lead survivors to attempt to control those around them, trying to protect them from addiction and overdose. These anxieties and attempts at control can become consuming if not addressed.

Strategies for Coping

Speak up:

This doesn't have to be verbally, but find some way that you will express the emotions that come with addiction and drug-related death. Do you need to yell from the rooftops? No. You may not even be ready to talk about it at all. Maybe you will find writing, art, music or photography are a better form of expression for you. Maybe you will blog about it! But one way or the other, start working toward a place where you can express your feelings about the addiction and overdose. If you are looking for simple, subtle expression you can purchase a silver overdose awareness pin or simply wear something silver on the 31st.

Though finding a means of expression is about you, keep in mind that it will also help others. It is our collective silence that keeps us in this vicious cycle of feeling alone and maintaining stigma. I remember the first time someone told me they had someone in their family suffering from a heroin addiction. It was a co-worker at a job I had many years ago. She said it in passing, like she had no reason to be ashamed. Up until that moment I thought everyone kept addiction in their family a secret. More accurately, I actually just assumed that no one else I knew was experiencing addiction in their family! I remember telling her my own story and feeling an indescribable sense of relief to know that I was not alone and my family was not alone. I decided from that moment on that I would stop hiding and lying about addiction, because if I could bring one other person that same sense of relief and connection it was worth the shame and judgment I feared. Will this kind of open discussion be right for everyone? No way. But it works for me and I am overwhelmed with the number of people I learn have been touched by addiction and overdose just by being open and honest about it.

Understand Addiction:

Most of us will always have some feelings of guilt and self-blame for the overdose deaths, and that is okay. Really. The difference in my feelings now from many years ago around overdose is that I have a far better understanding of addiction. In the spirit of nar-anon, al-anon, and Melody Beattie I have accepted that I am powerless over someone else's addiction. Though I shudder at every celebrity overdose death, it reminds me that all the money and love in the world still cannot always beat addiction. Does that belief dissolve all my guilt? Nope. Does it get rid of all the "what ifs"? Absolutely not. Does it change the fact that I believe that love and quality treatment can be life changing for someone suffering from addiction? No way. Grief and guilt are not rational, so we cannot reason them away. But this deeper understanding of addiction does help to keep my guilt in a normal, manageable, range rather than spiraling, obsessing, or becoming consumed by anxiety. It has helped me realize that much blame around addiction and overdose is misplaced. It has helped me feel empowered when I talk to others and address the myths and misconceptions about addiction and overdose.

Stand-up For Yourself:

As Feigleman et al (2011) suggest, "openly challeng[ing] unhelpful but well-intentioned efforts among intimate associates may help these survivors to establish more supportive environments for their healing among their families and friends". We have this tendency to shy away from telling people when their well-intentioned comments are not helpful. We let the comments slide, though we may ruminate about them later. If you are not feeling supported by the comments of friends and family, tell them! They may not realize that their well-intentioned words or actions are not helpful.

Avoid People Who Aren't Helping:

Some friends and family members will continue to be part of the problem, even after you talk to them about it. They may imply an overdose death is some sort of lesser death, or that the life of someone suffering addiction is somehow less worthy of mourning. If you give them feedback, stand-up for yourself, ask them for the kinds of support you need and they continue to cause you more harm than support, avoid them. Seriously. It is okay to give yourself permission to get some space from those people. Depending on your relationship with that person you may want or need to reintroduce them into your life in the future, but for now you need to focus on being surrounded by people who are supporting you in your grief. Want some help sorting out your support system and identifying who might help you the most? Check out our support system superlative journal prompt.

Learn About Specific Resources:

Though it may feel like you are all alone, there are resources specifically for people grieving substance deaths:

[GRASP \(Grief Recovery After Substance Passing\)](#) has groups that meet around the country and is specifically for those grieving an overdose death.

[Broken No More](#) has forums, articles, and resources for those grieving substance abuse deaths, and also works to change the stigma around addiction.

[Mom's Tell](#) provides information regarding substance abuse treatment, recovery, education, prevention legislation and policy issues in memory of the many lives lost to substance abuse. It was founded by a group of mom's who lost children to overdose and has been active for 15 years.

[Al-anon and Nar-anon](#) are family support groups for family members of those suffering from alcoholism or addiction. Though they are not grief groups, many people find support in these groups following drug and alcohol deaths. Though each group that meets will be different, my experience with these groups is that they are very open and supportive of those who lost someone to overdose.

[Local Support Groups](#) a google search in your area or calls around to some hospices may help you locate drug-related death support groups in your area, if there is no GRASP meeting in your area. More and more of these groups are popping up around the country, as overdose deaths continue to increase. If you know of one of these groups in any area across the county, please leave it in a comment to help others locate a group.