



## **When Someone Dies by Overdose**

Someone you care about has died by overdose. Unimaginable thoughts and feelings are swirling around in your head and body. A sense of shock may take over, as endless questions of why and how abound. Remember to take time to be gentle with yourself and understand that the many feelings you are experiencing are natural.

The incidence of overdose deaths in the United States has more than tripled since 1990. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the recent surge in drug overdose death rates is a result of increasing abuse of prescription painkillers. A key element in an overdose death is that the person intentionally or unintentionally used more of the substance than their body could handle. Addiction is a mental health condition, as are other “invisible” causes of death such as depression, which are often greatly misunderstood.

Perhaps you were unaware that your family member or friend had a problem with addiction to alcohol, prescription medication, or illegal drugs. Conversely, perhaps you were aware of issues with addiction, and felt you had to go to great lengths to deny that there was a problem or hide the problem from others due to a fear of judgment or stigma. You may therefore not be receiving the support you need. Talking about addiction as a disease may help you begin to understand your own feelings and reactions.

### **As you begin your journey of grief...**

Grievers experience a range of common reactions when a loved one has died. Natural grief reactions related to an overdose death may include the following:

- You may immediately experience a sense of shock and disbelief as you try to make sense of the devastating news.
- Wondering what to tell others may cause you to feel ashamed or worried about what they will think, due to the stigma that can be associated with addiction.
- Feelings of guilt or regret may arise while questioning what you could have said or done differently and what warning signs you may have missed.
- Angry feelings may be directed at the person who died (for the addiction, causing their own death, etc.), mental health or medical professionals, family members, or yourself.
- Questions about “why” may haunt you.
- You may find yourself thinking about or replaying images of final days, last conversations, or the scene of the death.
- You may experience relief, as the overdose was the end of a long and painful struggle with addiction.
- You may notice changes in your sleep patterns, appetite, and energy level.
- Just as being surrounded by family and friends may bring a sense of comfort, you may also need moments of solitude.

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### **Give yourself time...**

- Although people may expect you to return to your “old self,”, you are forever changed. Allow yourself time to readjust to your life without your dear one.
- Over time, your feelings will ebb and flow. While the raw pain will ease, your feelings, memories, or images may be triggered at the most unexpected times.
- Be gentle with yourself as you discover ways to honor the memory of the person who died.

Remember you are not alone as you move through your journey of grief. There is great value in sharing your thoughts, feelings, and memories with someone you trust.

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