

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHEN A SIGNIFICANT PERSON DIES FROM SUBSTANCE OVERDOSE

The information in this handout is provided by the Healing Patch. It is our hope it will provide you with some support and comfort during a difficult time.

Information was taken from *Companioning the Grieving Child* by Dr. Alan Wolfelt and a resource from the Our House Grief Support Center.

Kid-Friendly Key Terms and Definitions

Addiction - The urge to do something that is very hard to stop. An invisible disease that causes someone to use more (medicine, drugs, or alcohol) than is safe.

Overdose - When you take too much of medicine or drug and your body stops working. The overdose can cause the person to die or possibly cause permanent health problems.

Prescription Medication - Substance used for medical treatment, prescribed by a medical doctor.

Illicit Drug - Non-medical use of a variety of drugs. These are illegal and can only be bought or received by a drug dealer.

Death - When all parts of the body stop working. It doesn't breathe, see, hear, feel, eat, etc.

Substance Overdose and Stigma

Mr. Fred Rogers once said, "Anything that is human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be manageable." Nothing is truer than these words; however, losing a significant person to substance overdose and explaining this loss to children can be a very daunting task.

Unfortunately, accidental substance overdoses continue to be on the rise across our area, leaving more families at a loss as to how to tell and assist the children who are grieving their significant person.

Because of the potential stigma and shame associated with substance-related deaths, family members may not explain the cause of death to the child, leading to potential further complications of the grieving process. Children who have not been given the truth and later find out the cause of death are many times angry or lose trust in their loved ones. When not given all the information, it is common for children to make up stories in their minds. Many times, these stories involve blaming themselves in some way for the death.

Talking about Substance-Related Deaths with Children

It is important that the caregivers are honest, compassionate, and supportive when discussing the death of a significant person from substance overdose.

Important Tips for Conversation

- Not all medication is bad. Most of the time when prescribed by a doctor, the medicine will be needed to help an illness or problem with the body. However, some medications can cause addiction, leaving the mind and body to want more and more.

- Discuss at an age-appropriate level the various reasons why someone may abuse prescription medications or illicit drugs. Focus on addiction being a disease, and although the person may have made poor choices, that does not make them a bad person.

- Coping skills are very important to address. For example, if the substance overdose was due to emotional pain, there is an opportunity to discuss healthy ways to cope with life stressors. Healthy examples include exercise, talking to a friend or parent, art work, journal, etc.

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Common Feelings/Behaviors for Children

Children feel a variety of emotions following the death of someone significant - most commonly confusion, sadness, anger, worry, fear, guilt, embarrassment, and even relief.

Children will many times express their grief in very short, brief “doses” and then go back to daily living. Children’s grief may also be seen more in their behaviors. Some common behaviors include crying, regressive behaviors, clingy behaviors, increased time playing alone, physical complaints, not listening, and withdrawing.

Feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and relief are very common following a substance-related death. Let’s explore each of these a little closer.

Guilt - Guilt is perfectly normal following any death. For children who lost a significant person to substance overdose, this may only heighten, especially when they are not given sufficient information about the death. When children are left with gaps in the how’s and why’s that person died, many times they fill these holes with self-blame.

Shame/Embarrassment - Many times, children want to blend in with their peers. They don’t want to stick out as “the kid that lost his Dad to drugs.” Due to the stigma associated with substance-related deaths, children often feel high levels of embarrassment.

Relief - Relief is a common emotion especially after an extended illness before someone dies. In families where someone has an addiction, chaos, mood swings, unpredictable behaviors, legal issues, financial stress, and many other factors may take a toll on the child and family. The child may have a sense of relief that the family no longer needs to deal with the stressors related to their family member’s behaviors in regard to their addiction. The child will feel a wide variety of feelings, and each needs to be supported and validated.

Online Resources

grasphelp.org - Grief Recovery After A Substance Passing for parents/caregivers of the grieving child

childrengrieve.org - National Alliance for Children’s Grief

Children’s Grief Awareness Day

Children’s Grief Awareness Day is observed annually on the third Thursday in November to bring attention to the fact that often support can make all the difference in the life of a grieving child.

Learn more about this national movement at **childrengriefawarenessday.org**.

HEALING PATCH

A Children’s Grief Program

If you are parenting a grieving child and have questions regarding the grief process or would like to find out if a peer support group may benefit your child and family please call the Healing Patch at 1-800-445-6262.

What is the Healing Patch?

The Healing Patch is a free service for children of preschool age through 18 years who have experienced the loss of a significant person. The service is provided through family sessions at a center in Blair County and through services in the community. Additional services include in-school services, community education, and lending libraries. Healing Patch Family Sessions provide a safe environment for participants to discover they are not alone through the support of peers and volunteers. Participants share memories and experiences to learn what they are going through is normal and that hope and healing are possible.

Is there a fee?

Services are available at no cost to families. Funding is provided by community dollars, local grants, and support from the Home Nursing Agency Foundation.



1-800-445-6262

www.homenursingagency.com