



## **“Did my person intend to die?”**

### **A Question that Might Affect Grief After a Substance-Use Death**

One of the dilemmas sometimes faced by the bereaved is that — even though a death from substance use might be deemed accidental or due to medical complications — it is self-inflicted, which brings up questions about the person’s role in their death. This is complicated, of course, by various perspectives about substance use and addiction, including what power the person actually has to choose their behavior.

In fact, this can be a very complicated matter that includes questions about the person’s choices over a lifetime (choices made before addiction was a factor or during periods of freedom from addiction), about limitations imposed on them by society (for example, if they did not have access to the help they needed), and about whether we can ever understand what goes on inside of another person’s heart and mind.

The bereaved’s perspective on the person’s volition or dominion can affect emotions such as anger (the person is irresponsible or inconsiderate vs. this is something that happened to them or they did their best), abandonment (they did this to me or to their family vs. they couldn’t help it), blame (it is their fault vs. substances and addiction are to blame). The reality for most people is that they don’t think about these things in an “either”/“or” way because human behavior—and other people’s and society’s roles in what happens in a given situation—are very complicated matters. There can also be a great deal of emotion over the perception that the person rejected the help of their loved one, which can cause not only feelings of rejection but also of confusion, helplessness, and despair.

Finally, an overdose death can leave uncertainty about whether it was an accident or suicide. Even the medical examiner can be uncertain and not able to determine the manner of death right away, or different family members may disagree about whether it was an accident or intentional. Circumstances such as this can cause strife for the bereaved, and the tension can even overshadow people’s ability to focus on grieving their loss.