



“Was my person’s death preventable?”

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

It is common for the question of whether the death could have been prevented to be very important to the bereaved — and it can be very emotionally charged when the answer people arrive at is “Yes.”

The emotional fallout from the perception that a person died unnecessarily (because of neglect, incompetence, indifference, judgmentalism, etc.) can be intense, and the resulting anger and blame (or guilt) can become the bereaved’s focus. A host of people and forces might be subject to the survivors’ anger, including the deceased; family, friends, or employers; medical providers or insurance companies; and God or the government. And sometimes the bereaved person is the one who feels that they could and should have prevented the death and are, therefore, responsible for the tragedy.

The search for answers — and reacting to answers they believe to be accurate — can consume a lot of mental and emotional energy in the midst of a person’s grief. This may make it difficult for them to grasp the reality of the death or to participate fully in mourning the loss of their loved one, but on the other hand, it may also give them a sense of purpose in acting on behalf of their loved one (including having a commitment to advocacy and societal change that is fruitful to them and others).

In any event, focusing on the idea that the death could have been prevented can make for a long, hard journey during which the survivor:

- Explores and dissects every aspect of the circumstances of what happened
- Tries to untangle and make sense of substance-use treatment and medical systems
- Is repeatedly touched by other deaths because of the media or because people reach out to them when someone dies
- Might reach the conclusion that no one is held accountable or that “nothing changes”

It is important to keep in mind that people’s view of whether substance-use deaths can be prevented varies a great deal, with some believing that almost all deaths could be prevented if society and individuals did the right things and others believing that “this sort of death” is an inevitable aspect of human society. Those broad attitudes in and of themselves also can have a profound effect on the bereaved.