

COPING WITH GRIEF FROM A SUBSTANCE-USE DEATH

GRIEF IN GENERAL

Grief involves several tasks, but they do not unfold in a particular order, and each individual experiences grief in their own way over the course of their lifetime. The tasks of grief (adapted from [J. William Worden](#)):

- Facing the reality of the loss
- Coping with the pain of grief
- Living in a world without the deceased
- Exploring enduring connections with the deceased
- Engaging in the next phase of life

GRIEF AFTER A SUBSTANCE-USE DEATH

Key questions: After someone dies from substance use, the answers to three commonly asked questions may contribute to survivors' experiences of grief:

- "Why did this person die from substance use?"
- "Did the person intend to die?"
- "Was the death preventable?"

Key emotions: A death from substance use can cause survivors to experience troublesome thoughts and strong feelings such as:

- Shock
- Anger
- Shame
- Failure
- Unfairness
- Disbelief
- Blame
- Abandonment
- Helplessness
- Fear
- Confusion
- Guilt
- Rejection
- Hopelessness
- Relief

Even before the death, coping with substance use may begin to influence what happens to the bereaved after the death occurs:

- Dynamics of addiction: Relationships can be affected by shifting roles, crises, intense emotions, a negative world view, unmanageability, etc.
- Caregiver effects: Caring for a person at risk of overdose can affect caregivers similarly to how caring for the terminally ill affects them.
- Ambiguous loss: Sometimes, a person using substances is utterly absent psychologically in a way that resembles an actual death.

Other factors that come into play when someone dies from substance use may have a profound impact on the bereaved:

- Stigma: Negative judgments about the character people of affected by substance use can cause survivors to be mistreated or isolated.
- Disenfranchised grief: Survivors' grief can be treated as insignificant because the deceased's behavior is seen as contributing to their death.
- Trauma: Survivors may experience trauma from being involved in situations ranging from taking part in a resuscitation attempt to being exposed to media coverage of the death.