



COPING WITH STIGMA AFTER A DEATH FROM SUBSTANCE USE

Death from substance use is a stigmatized death — like death from suicide or AIDS. Stigma is an insidious force that seriously affects the bereaved. It is malevolent and is fueled by prejudice and discrimination — which involves people believing that the members of a subgroup are inferior and denying them the human rights and humane treatment they deserve (and to which others with issues that are not stigmatized have access). It causes them to be negatively and harmfully judged not only by individuals but also by their communities (their family, colleagues, faith community, etc.).

Thankfully, not everyone stigmatizes people bereaved by a death from substance use, but unfortunately, stigma commonly causes people to act as if:

- People who die this way are not as important as others who have died
- The bereaved are not as deserving of comfort, understanding, or support as others who have suffered a loved one's death

People stigmatizing the bereaved harms them by mistreating them and hurting their feelings, which makes them wary of contact with others; causes them to feel misunderstood by and angry toward others; and isolates them. At a time when their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual resources are strained to the limit, stigma tells the bereaved that they are on their own. This makes the pain of loss worse and more difficult bear.

Anger is a common emotional reaction to stigma, and the sense of isolation that comes with it can also cause fear and hopelessness — but the most painful emotion it causes is shame. In fact, the purpose of stigma is to cause shame.

Here are some examples of what you might say to counter stigma (these are only examples and may not apply to your situation):

- “My loved one died after a courageous struggle with a substance-use disorder, which is an illness like diabetes.”
- “I believe my loved one's death was caused by the disease of addiction, and I am devastated that he could not get the help he needed to recover.”
- “Substance-use disorder took my loved one away from me even though he was getting all the help he could, and I just don't understand how that could be.”
- “My loved one was overcome by a terrible disease, and there is nothing about what happened that I'm ashamed of.”
- “Addiction killed my loved one, and I wish he could have gotten sober even in the face of all that was overwhelming him.”
- “My loved one died from an overdose, and that could happen to anyone. He was a good, loving, caring man.”

Here are ways you might respond if people ask you personal or prying questions about your loved one's death:

- "I think that question is too personal. That's just not the sort of thing I want to talk about."
- "These things you're asking are very upsetting to me. I just need to mourn my loss and not have to answer questions like that."
- "My family and I are going through a terrible tragedy, and it is very painful for me to talk about what happened."
- "My loved one died of a substance-use disorder, and that is truly no different than when someone dies of any physical illness."
- "I really don't need any advice: I just need to know that you care about me."
- "I don't want to talk about how my loved one died. I want to talk about how he lived."
- "It's just too hard for me to talk about any of this right now. Please excuse me."
- "There's nothing wrong with me breaking down (or getting angry or going off by myself, etc.): I'm heartbroken and my feelings are very raw."