

FIVE CORE ACTIONS: HOW TO HELP PEOPLE AT THE SCENE AFTER AN OVERDOSE FATALITY[#]

Studies have shown that the five core actions outlined below can be helpful to people who have been exposed to a traumatic event that involves loss of life.* Each core action is listed below with examples of specific responses to consider on behalf of a person who is affected by the death, whether a family member of the deceased, another staff person, or a bystander.

● **Promote safety**

- Ensure that there is a safe space for the person to be.
- Communicate and demonstrate your interest in their safety.
- Focus on basic needs (food, water, sleep, comfort, shelter, medical attention).
- Advise them on the risks of using alcohol, drugs, etc. to cope with distress.
- Protect their privacy (including from the media).
- Respond decisively to distress or danger (e.g., harm to self or others).

● **Promote calm**

- Be calm yourself (and compassionate, nonjudgmental).
- Dispense only information that you know is accurate.
- Listen with patience to whatever the person wants to share.
- Let them choose how and how much they want to talk about the death (if at all).
- Normalize intense emotions, troublesome thoughts, etc.
- Suggest calming practices (see bit.ly/copingtactics).

● **Promote connectedness**

- Remember that your sincere attentiveness to them strengthens connectedness.
- Create opportunities for peers who have had similar experiences to be together.
- Encourage them to be in touch with key supportive people (family, friends, clergy, etc.).
- Give them “permission” to avoid unhelpful people and situations.
- Help them get professional support if they need it (see bit.ly/getprosupport).

● **Promote hope**

- Express hopefulness in practical terms:
 - "As hard as this is, I believe we're doing a good job."
 - "I just believe in helping the next person if we can."
- Avoid platitudes ("This too shall pass) and predictions ("The situation is going to get better").
- Reinforce their gains, strengths, assets.
- Affirm that recovering from this distress is possible.
- If it is appropriate, say something about why you do the work you do, and invite them to share their reasons for doing the work.

● **Promote self-efficacy (personal empowerment)**

- Engage them in decisions, planning, taking action.
- Focus on the immediate next step.
- Encourage small, achievable, incremental steps.
- Don't over-manage the situation.
- Understand their needs from their point of view (don't assume).
- Avoid being critical.

[#]Excerpted with permission from *Coping with Overdose Fatalities: Tools for Public Health Workers*, Massachusetts Bureau of Substance Addiction Services. Downloaded at bit.ly/odfatalities.

*Hobfoll, S.E., Watson, P., Bell, C.C., Bryant, R.A., Brymer, M.J., Friedman, M.J., ... Ursano. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. *Psychiatry* 70(4), 283–315.