



“Why did my person die from substance use?”

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

On one level, this is a matter-of-fact question — focused on the who, what, where, when, and how of what happened — and the answers might relieve a bereaved person simply because they learn the facts about what was previously not known, or it might trouble a person to know the details of what happened. If you choose to explore more about what happened, judge for yourself whether the process is helpful to you.

On another level, why a person dies of substance use involves metaphysical questions, focused on the mystery of death or on people’s destiny or fate.

- Why did substance use take my person’s life? Why did it hurt my family?
- How does substance use taking my person’s life fit into what I believe about the meaning or purpose of life?
- How does the role of substance use in my person’s death affect my view of my relationship with them (before they died, and in the future as I remember them)?

Here are only a few examples of the emotional fallout from struggling with the question “Why?” Grappling with the role substance use played in the person’s death might stir up feelings of having been cheated (that the person was “stolen” from you) or mistreated (that addiction is cruel). Substances and substance use might be viewed as a villain in the person’s death and cause the bereaved to feel angry or abandoned — and there are all sorts of people and institutions that might be blamed for the death (the deceased, other family members or friends, the treatment system, God, etc.). Substance use often seems to overwhelm a person, leaving the bereaved to feel confused and helpless. In addition, the bereaved may feel relieved after a person dies, because their suffering has come to an end.

It can be helpful to consider that a person’s death likely is caused by multiple factors. Each situation is complicated, and no single cause is exclusively responsible for a person’s death. The why of dying from substance use is like a puzzle, and a person’s death scatters the pieces in every direction. It takes time and help from others to find as many of the puzzle pieces as you can — but you might never find them all.

At some point, many bereaved people begin asking themselves not only “Why?” but also, “Are there things about what happened — and why it happened — that I will never know?” For some, the search eventually leads to grappling with the limits to what we can know about our loved one’s life and death.