

Understanding Grief After an Overdose Death

New England Region
National Network of Libraries of Medicine
Substance Use Disorder Webinar Series

November 28, 2018



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My Background

- Peer grief helper, trainer, advocate
- Grief support
 - After suicide
 - After a death from substance use (DSU)
 - After a death in the military
- Personal connections
 - Father; Franklin & two brothers; daughter
- Projects: Grief after DSU (Mass.)
 - Frontline service providers
 - Support for the bereaved

Grief ...

- Unfolds naturally
 - People live their way through grief
 - Grief needs space to be what it already is
- Is individualistic
 - Deceased, survivor, their relationship
 - One's life story is a one-of-a-kind creation
- Serves a purpose
 - Pain of grief is linked to love
 - Grieving is a process of making meaning
- Evolves over the bereaved's lifetime
 - The deceased is integral to who the bereaved is as a person

Essential Tasks of Grief

- Facing the reality of the loss
- Coping with the pain (and emotions) of grief
- Living in a world without the person
- Exploring continuing bonds with the person
- Engaging in the next phase of life

Adapted from Worden's "Four Tasks of Mourning"
(Worden, 2009, pp. 39–53)

Themes: Grief after DSU

- Key issues:
 - Why?
 - Intention
 - Prevention
- Impact from:
 - Stigma
 - Trauma, distress
- Living with substance use, addiction

Why?

- Practical:
 - What actually happened?
 - Role of substance use, addiction
- Metaphysical:
 - Why my person? Family? Me?
 - View of meaning of life
- Continuing relationship with deceased

Why?: Emotional Responses

- Shock, disbelief, confusion
... that substance use took the person's life
- Helplessness, hopelessness, anger
... over power of substances, addiction
- Relief
... over end of person's suffering

Intention

- The person's decisions and actions:
 - Willful and in their control?
 - Limitations on choice, freedom?
- Two domains:
 - Contributing to the death over time
 - Directly causing the actual death

Intention: Emotional Responses

- Shock, disbelief
... over self-inflicted death
- Anger, blame
... over person's perceived role
- Abandonment
... over rejection of values, assistance
- Helplessness, guilt
... over bereaved's perceived failure to aid or influence the person

Intention: Accident vs. Suicide

- Delayed official determination
- Disagreements about manner of death
- Emotional responses:
 - Confusion
 - Anger ...
 - Strife among family members
 - Distressful communications with officials
 - Helplessness ... from lacking power, control

Prevention

- How could it have been prevented?
Who ...? What ...?
- Can consume bereaved's energy
- Long, difficult process
 - Always multiple causal factors
 - Treatment system is complicated
 - Epidemic is ongoing
 - Accountability is elusive

Prevention: Emotional Responses

- Anger, blame
 - ... at those perceived to be at fault
- Guilt, shame
 - ... over survivor's perceived role
- Shock, disbelief, helplessness
 - ... over perceived failure to stop a preventable tragedy
- Fear
 - ... over someone else dying

Stigma

- Malevolent (prejudice, discrimination)
- Disenfranchised grief
 - Deceased not as important
 - Bereaved not as deserving
 - Bereaved not “eligible” (illegitimate)
- Isolation, disconnectedness
 - Increases pain of loss
 - Denies comfort and support
 - Positions communities as “judges”

Stigma: Emotional Responses

- Shame
 - ... over perception of being bad, less than
- Anger
 - ... over being judged, mistreated
- Fear, hopelessness
 - ... from being “on my own,” feeling ostracized

- Stigma and feelings of relief

Emotional Responses

- | | |
|-------------|----------------|
| • Shock | • Anger |
| • Disbelief | • Abandonment |
| • Confusion | • Fear |
| • Guilt | • Relief |
| • Shame | • Helplessness |
| • Blame | • Hopelessness |

Trauma, Distress

- Shock of a sudden or violent death
- Resuscitation attempt
- Finding or identifying the body
- Person's body not found for days
- Recreating "pictures"
- Media, social media
- Effects of epidemic

Common Responses to Trauma

Cognitive	Emotional	Physical	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• poor concentration• confusion• disorientation• indecisiveness• shortened attention span• memory loss• unwanted memories• difficulty making decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• shock• numbness• feeling overwhelmed• depression• feeling lost• fear of harm to self and/or loved ones• feeling nothing• feeling abandoned• uncertainty of feelings• volatile emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• nausea• lightheadedness• dizziness• gastro-intestinal problems• rapid heart rate• tremors• headaches• grinding of teeth• fatigue• poor sleep• pain• hyperarousal• jumpiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• suspicion• irritability• arguments with friends and loved ones• withdrawal• excessive silence• inappropriate humor• increased/decreased eating• change in sexual desire or functioning• increased smoking• increased substance use or abuse

Excerpted from the CDC handout "Helping Patients Cope with a Traumatic Event" available at bit.ly/traumafactscdc.

Before the Death Occurs

- Family dynamics of addiction
- Caring for a chronically ill person
- Ambiguous loss

Family Dynamics of SUD

- Maladaptive behavior
- Negative world view
- Other family members' substance use
- Life disruptions

Intense Situations, Feelings

- Overdoses, suicide attempts
- Repetitive crises
- Verbal or physical confrontations
- Extreme anger
- Feeling trapped, forced, manipulated
- Abandonment, rejection, separation
- Pain over the person's suffering
- Lack of safety
- Unpredictability

Caring for Chronically Ill Person

- Caregivers experience many losses
 - Practical losses
 - Relational losses
- They face a life-or-death situation
 - Fear, helplessness, hypervigilance
 - Crises, including rescue attempts
- When the worst happens ...
 - Caregiver depleted, exhausted
 - Failure, guilt
 - Loss of sense of purpose

Ambiguous Loss

- Like a death without the person dying
- Physically present, psychologically absent
- Addiction can involve families in the loss

Closing

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