



The Power of Parenting: How to Help Your Child After the Death of a Sibling From Substance Use or Overdose

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

We are sorry for the loss of your child. No parent should ever have to go through what you are going through. One of the greatest challenges for bereaved parents is that they must often cope with their grief while attending to their surviving children's needs. Below you'll find information for all caregivers who are parenting children after the death of a sibling from substance use or overdose. Drawing from the wisdom of parents and children who have been through this experience, we've provided information on how to facilitate grieving in your family as you grapple with the past, cope with the present, and look towards healing in the future. This fact sheet is intended to support parents of children ages 7 and older.

“ We were utterly devastated by our daughter’s death. But our son obviously needed us too. We just weren’t sure what would be helpful to him and what might only make it worse. It was a confusing, painful time for us. Gradually, with support, we started to heal. ”

1 Helping Your Child Cope with Stigma and Shame

One of the most difficult things that family members grapple with is the stigma associated with death connected to substance use or overdose. This happens when individuals who hear about the circumstances make negative comments or assumptions about the person who died that are wrong and/or hurtful. For children or adolescents, they may seem to isolate themselves out of shame, guilt, or remorse. This social isolation can lead to decreased support and may eventually put children at further risk. As a caregiver, you can be an important model for how to talk about the shame and stigma that your family may be grappling with. Also, it can be especially helpful to find grief support for children in such situations.

I knew it wasn't true, but I felt like we all had to have done something wrong for Josh to die driving while drunk. And the way people looked at us? Like we were all addicts too. Learning as a family about addiction being a disease went a long way in helping us heal. It gave us the language to talk about it with others.

David W., father

When I started a new high school, I didn't want anyone to know how my sister died. I was so embarrassed and ashamed at my old school. So I just stuffed my feelings down. I would tell people I was an only child. Eventually, I exploded and got suspended for fighting. My stepmom was the one who found me the grief camp to go to. I didn't want to go and I was so mad they sent me. I didn't talk for the whole first day there. When I realized there were other kids who were going through the same thing, and later talked about my sister with them... it got better.

Jayden A., sibling

Every year since Amir died, our family participates in a local walk to raise awareness about addiction. We've met many other families who get it in a way no one else does. We found community there among strangers.

Rashida Z, mother

Take Action Tips:

- Stigma means being viewed in a negative light because of unfair assumptions, beliefs or stereotypes. Talk with your kids about how stigma may have affected their relationship with their sibling and how it still affects their feelings about their loss.
- Recognize that many families who have suffered loss feel shame, guilt, and regret. These are normal emotional reactions when we wish the outcome had been different. Become a supportive listener, open to hearing about your children's experiences and responses, whatever they may be. Remember that the pain of negative feelings decreases in the light of sharing with others.
- Know that shame is a powerful emotion and often hard for people to admit they feel or experience. Sometimes, admissions of shame, guilt, or regret require the aid of a therapist. If you sense that you or your surviving children are carrying these feelings, seek a therapist who can listen non-judgmentally.

2 There Will Be A Wide Range of Reactions Among Family Members

If the death of your child was connected to substance use, there is often a wide range of reactions among family members. This can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or miscommunications among family members that can make the grieving process more difficult. Surviving siblings may have hidden fears or worries that they hesitate to talk about because, in part, they are concerned about upsetting you or other members of the family. All of these feelings and experiences are common reactions to this type of death.

I behaved so badly after my older brother died. I guess I thought, if I died too, at least we'd be together again. Now I look back and feel terrible I put my parents through even more grief by risking my own life.

Jorge S., sibling

I tried to be perfect after Emilia died. My family had enough going on so I just focused on helping out around the house and getting good grades. But the worry is always there. I knew Emilia had been sneaking out of the house to use and I never told anyone. What if they find out it's my fault? I could lose the rest of my family too.

Louisa P, sibling



I know it's an awful thing to admit as a parent but truthfully, the weight of the worrying, the fighting with her to quit, the cost and effort that went into each trip to rehab, then the overwhelming sense of disappointment when she started using again was a lot to bear. I think about my little girl and miss her every single day – but I also wouldn't want to relive the last few years of her life. I felt like we lived in a war zone and now, even though we lost everything, at least we have a chance of finding some peace.

Carey J., mother

Take Action Tips:

- Expect a wide range of grief from yourself and your children; understand this is normal and share this with your family.
- Let your kids know that all feelings are okay and there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve.
- Check-in individually with each of your kids and through family meetings. As long as they are not hurting themselves or others, allow them to express their emotions as they choose.

Your child's addiction influences everyone in different ways. Here are some examples:

- Trying to protect or save the child who is using.
- Anticipating the loss of the child even before the death occurs - believing the child is headed down a path of self-destruction.
- Ignoring substance use altogether or maintaining the status quo even if that isn't particularly healthy.
- Beginning or resuming substance use after the overdose death of a child.
- Repeating family patterns of substance use.

What is Anticipatory Grief? Anticipatory Grief refers to the normal mourning a family does when they expect a death. This can be in the case of chronic or terminal illness but is also experienced by families living with a family member's chronic substance use, especially if there have been previous overdoses.

Back then, I remember being so mad that my mom got so bent out of shape because I had a couple of beers at a party. Denis was taking pills for years and she got mad at me for beer? First, my brother got all the attention for using; then he got all the attention for dying. My parents stopped functioning. I was left to take care of my younger siblings. I felt like I deserved to blow off a little steam.

Peter N., sibling

I was sober 22 years when my child died. I'm ashamed to admit that the only way I got through those first awful weeks was by taking anything I could get my hands on to blot it all out. When I finally came back to reality, the way my other kids looked at me...It's like they were saying I was to blame for Silvio's death. Like it's in my genes and I gave him this disease.

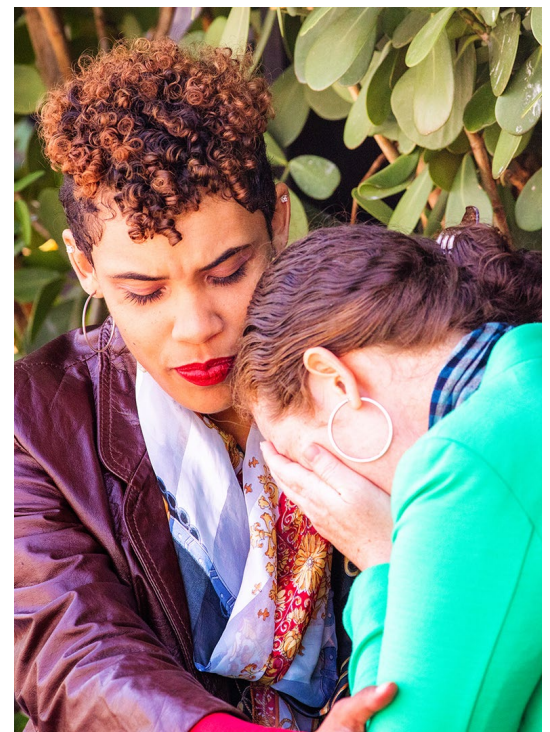
Marisa R., mother

Madisyn's death forced us all to change the way we lived. My wife and I couldn't hold our marriage together anymore, but that actually ended up being best for both of us. We let each other go with love. Neither of us was going to let Madisyn's death be in vain, so we both have remained active with the things Madisyn loved most in her life like soccer and the summer camp where she worked. Our surviving daughter struggled for the first five years but now she's in college and has decided to study psychology because she wants to help families like us. All of us have been shaped by Madisyn's life and death.

Sarah F., mother

Take Action Tips:

- Acknowledge that the pain experienced after a death connected to substance use can include feelings such as anger or guilt that were present before the death happened. Similarly, the pain experienced after the death may include feelings about how roles in the family have changed since the death.
- Ask your children questions about the loss of their sibling beyond just their feelings. How is the loss of their sibling affecting their friendships? Their school work? Their hope for the future?
- Plan an activity to do together. Though it may take some time to feel like you want to have "family fun" again, it can be helpful to make positive family outings or indoor time a routine part of your new family life. Some families choose to participate in memorials or rituals they create together to honor their loved one. However, recognize that some family members need such activities and others prefer not to participate. Both are okay. Some families also decide to take a trip together: a change in scenery can be useful in allowing time to grieve together as well as grow into the family you are becoming.



4 Your Lives Now: Adapting to Loss

Grief can feel like it will swallow you whole. Despite what you may have been told, most families find grief never “resolves” or goes away. You just learn how to cope with it better over time. Finding healthy ways to cope with your grief, individually and as a family unit, can support you as you move forward with your lives after loss.

Every year on his birthday, we celebrate Andre’s life. I want to remember him at his best; not at his worst. We go to watch his favorite football team and then we go out to eat at his favorite restaurant. I can feel him near me when we are together like this.

Marquita J., mother

I’m only 21 but I’m raising the daughter of my younger sister who died six months ago. It’s hard work. I wasn’t ready to be a parent but neither was my sister Cheryl when she had Edie. I wasn’t going to let Cheryl’s only child go into foster care. I see so much of Cheryl in Edie.

Paul C., sibling

My son and I volunteer as emergency responders. I wish we could have saved our first-born, Jason, but I know he is proud of us for trying to help others.

Samuel L., father

Take Action Tips:

- Recognize that you will move forward but that doesn’t mean you are “moving on” or forgetting your loved one. Hold space for all the changes that will come into your lives and give everyone time to move at their own pace through their grief.
- Give yourself and your family permission to experience joy in your lives. Make a family bucket list and try to see how many items on it you can do together.
- Create a family ritual to honor your deceased child’s life and legacy.



5 Prioritizing Self-Care and Support

As a parent, it may be hard to think about what you need if your kids are hurting. The reality is that the more you do to take care of yourself, the more you will be able to take care of your grieving child or children. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable and to ask for help is a critical first step.

I was struggling to convince my kids to see a therapist after their younger sister died from a substance overdose. But the community garden a few blocks over was holding a remembrance ceremony for people in the neighborhood who had passed. I got them out to that one event, and they had a counselor there. Once they met the counselor and saw the support for us in the neighborhood, they were more willing to go see the counselor at the grief center. We did a six-week group there for families and met others like us.

Lilliana Q., mother

My teenage daughter is so angry since her brother died. She won't speak to me about it. So I made sure my best friend, who she's always looked up to, texts her regularly. She won't say mum to me, but she'll pour her heart out to Janelle. And I respect that. I know Janelle will let me know if it rises to a crisis level.

Robin S., mother

I started going to Temple with my parents again after Mark died. I'm grateful that our Rabbi has been hanging out after coffee hour to check on us. She gave my parents a book that they are both reading and it's helping us to talk about him finally.

Elizabeth M., sibling

Take Action Tips:

- Help yourself first. You can't help your family if you are not caring for yourself first and foremost. Eat. Sleep. Cry. Talk. Walk. Pray. Grieve. Do whatever is comforting to you and get help for yourself, whether professionally or from your network of friends and family.
- Ask for practical help. When you are newly bereaved, everyone offers to come to your assistance at your time of need. But many offers stop after the first few weeks or months. However, people's good intentions are often still there. If you need help, follow up on an offer and ask for help now or later. Sometimes we need someone to hold us. And sometimes we just need someone to do the laundry or pick up a child from school.
- Know where to look for help. If you don't know where to get professional help, ask a friend to contact your local crisis center, grief service, or referral hotline and compile a list of resources for you.
- Above all, be kind to yourself. Don't expect to be perfect and don't blame yourself if everything isn't exactly the way you want it to be. Despite difficulties you may experience, remember that you are trying your and you are not alone.



There are a variety of professional organizations dedicated to supporting bereaved youth and providing information about evidence-based practices:

The Trauma and Grief Center:

<https://www.texaschildrens.org/departments/trauma-and-grief-center>

NY Life Foundation:

<https://www.newyorklife.com/foundation/bereavement>

Family Bereavement Program:

<http://reachinstitute.asu.edu/programs/resilientparent>

National Alliance for Grieving Children:

<https://childrengrieve.org>

For more information about the impact of substance abuse on families, visit:

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/populations-at-risk/trauma-and-substance-abuse>

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/the-power-of-parenting-how-to-help-your-child-after-the-death-of-a-sibling-from-substance-use-or-overdose>

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