

No Blame, No Shame: Navigating Stigmatized Grief

Navigating the complexities of stigmatized grief: shock, shame, blame, isolation, guilt, regret and lack of support are just a few of the complicating factors that a bereaved family may be faced with after a sudden and often traumatic drug related death. There may be many unanswered questions, takes time to get reports, people ask many questions, societal stigma complicates the grieving process.

A sudden loss means there is no time to say goodbye, “I love you”, I’m sorry” or opportunity to heal the relationship. If the person was young there may be a sense of injustice. When a loss was preventable there can be anger, and guilt. Anger can be at the deceased, the person who supplied the drugs or the medical staff or police involved. A sudden traumatic loss often creates an emotional rollercoaster.

There may be specific variables that can make a loss involving drugs even more challenging: including a long history of addiction prior to the death, fractured relationships, mental health disorders, the role the deceased person played in the family, prior loss history, coping skills, strength and resources available.

Understand that each member of the family will grieve in their own unique way and own time. Important to respect and honor those differences for the healing journey and family cohesion. Too often family members become estranged from one another following a stigmatized loss. Grandparents, parents, siblings, children, extended family each have their own unique grief path. Often there can be a struggle around grief causing a sense of competition (whose pain is worse). Learn the three common styles of grieving. Intuitive, cognitive and instrumental and how each person can find healing strategies within their style. Grievers are encouraged to share, don’t compare.

Discuss helpful ways to approach and companion a newly bereaved griever or one who has lost a loved one a few years ago- friend, family member, neighbor, colleague or community member. Grievers must deal with so many insensitive comments and even blame. Don’t blame a family for this disease. Educate yourself about the opioid epidemic that is affecting so many. We don’t blame someone for having cancer. Provide family with resources like Grasp (grief recovery after substance passing). www.grasphelp.org. or www.CompassionateFriends.org It is so important that people don’t think they are alone in their grief.

Learn the four tasks of mourning and discover how each task will impact the griever and family and support healing. Important to learn healthy coping tools and strategies, find support in groups or with a friend and find ways to eventually invest time and energy into meaningful activities often associated with the loss, but not necessarily. Many become involved in support groups, create scholarships or 5K runs, or volunteer to help others who are struggling. Meaning making can be vital after a loss.

Addiction and cancer are both diseases, yet most of us feel more equipped to support a griever who has lost a loved one to cancer than when drugs are involved. People are at a loss for words and sadly withdraw from the grieving who need compassionate support more than ever. Be aware of your own beliefs and feelings about drug addiction. Educate yourself. Fear can create judgment and stigma.

Learning objectives

1. To understand the unique differences in the grieving process when a death is drug related and often sudden, traumatic and has a societal stigma associated to it.
2. Learn the three typical styles of grief (intuitive, cognitive and instrumental) and how to support grievers in their healing style.
3. Identify what may be helpful and what may be hurtful when supporting or working with a someone who has lost a loved one to a drug related death.
4. Distinguish the following terms ambiguous loss, complicated grief and disenfranchised grief.
5. Four tasks of mourning

Understanding and Supporting the Forgotten Mourners: Bereaved Children and Bereaved Siblings

Understand how children and teens grieve differently than adults.

Identify factors following an overdose death that may add to the complication of the grieving process for children and siblings.

Learn how parents and grandparents can nurture these children, encourage them in a variety of healthy ways to express their feelings and model healthy grieving.

Discover how educators can implement simple ideas and learn tips and strategies so that bereaved children feel safer at school in their grief. Help bereaved children and teens to identify safe and caring adults and safe places to go to during school for managing their emotions and behaviors.

Identify why unacknowledged and unexpressed grief can be detrimental to children's wellbeing long term. Find out why supporting these grieving young people effectively and building on their resilience and coping skills is so important for their future.

Providing helpful local and national resources to bereaved children, siblings and families is important. Encourage bereaved young people to find healthy ways to keep their memories of their loved ones (if they want to) as well as nurturing their own ideas about how they can make a difference by helping others in memory of their loved one. Volunteering can be healing.

Bereaved children who lose a sibling are often told to be strong for their parents, to take on a maturity that no child or teen is prepared for.

Often bereaved siblings are asked by others "How are your parents doing?" Often no one asks the siblings how they are. Or people say, "Be good to your parents." "You are the man of the house now." This leaves children on their own to grieve.

Surviving Siblings often try to shield their bereaved parents and grandparents from their own grief. They often have nowhere to go with their own grief as they don't want to upset their parents. Another reason that educators need to understand childhood grief.

How can parents, grandparents, educators and other caring adults support them? What can adults do to help these children and teens adjust in healthier ways to their unwanted "new normal". Adjusting to a sibling death can be symbolic of the death of the "old family" and a need to adjust to the "new family." That is integral for healing and can take a long time. Hard for children to see their grieving parent feeling overwhelmed, preoccupied or even at times that they don't want to live anymore. Parents change after the death of a child. That is another loss for the surviving children; the loss of their former parents.

So destabilizing to see your bereaved parents unravel at any age. You imagine them to be the stable force in your life. Suddenly see them sad, fragile and in pain. Seeing parents cry, especially dad being vulnerable is strange. Everyone is seeking to find a new normal. Not one that anyone signed up for.

Siblings often have complicated relationships with their siblings. Love, hate, rivalry, competition, best friends, enemies, distant. With addiction there can be even more complicating factors. Did this sibling who died already get the bulk of attention from the parents due to their struggle with addiction? Or now the surviving child may not like all the added attention on them from the family.

Some siblings feel or even say that the wrong child died. They feel that their parent liked the one who died more than them or wonder if they died if their parents would be as heartbroken.

Not natural to lose a sibling as a child or teenager. They worry if someone else will die next. They can struggle with guilt and blame and anger.

If there were only two kids in the family and one died now the sibling may be called an "only child". They now may receive too much and often unwanted attention from parents. More pressure on them to do well. To make up for the loss of the sibling.

First year after death seems like parents' lives came to a halt. More like robots.

Getting married or having a baby or graduating or going to college or starting anything happy right after a sibling death just casts a black cloud over the joyful occasion for many bereaved siblings.

Siblings who also are using drugs add to the grief process for all. Intense worry or scrutiny on kids.

A dead sibling cannot make any new mistakes whereas a living sibling continues to make new mistakes. That alone creates an issue. It may feel like a sibling died perfect. Some parents build a shrine and have more photos of the deceased child than the living ones. Sibling rivalry may continue after death. The child who died is put on a pedestal. That impedes the healing process for the family.

Dealing with some matter of fact questions.

How many in your family? Got siblings? Dealing with more intrusive questions.

How did she die? Did you know he was addicted? Was the overdose accidental? How do you know?

Post Traumatic Growth

Thank you,

Lisa Athan, MA Executive Director of Grief Speaks

www.griefspeaks.com lisa@griefspeaks.com

(973) 985-4503

Follow Grief Speaks on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter

