

August 30

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Prevention Tips for Everyone

Pay attention to social media

Teens and younger children communicate frequently via social media and texting. Social media can benefit grieving children by providing them with a familiar, controlled space to talk about their feelings and share information. However, as a caring adult, knowing how social media can be challenging for grieving children is important. Some communications may be hurtful or inappropriate, and somebody may spread rumors or false information about the death. Additionally, social media interactions should be balanced with face-to-face support. Talk with young people about their experiences on social media, good and bad, and offer in-person support if you can. [1](#), [5](#)



Know! to Support a Child who has lost a Loved One to an Overdose

When someone dies from an overdose, the stigma surrounding addiction or experiencing a mental health-related death can add another layer of emotions, such as guilt, judgment, and anger, to the already difficult grieving process. These complex emotions can make talking about and processing the death even more difficult.¹

Support from caring adults in their community is essential for young people who lose a parent, sibling, or mentor to overdose.² This Grief Awareness Day (August 30th) and Overdose Awareness Day (August 31st), consider the following tips for discussing overdose deaths and supporting young people experiencing stigmatized grief.

Use clear, honest language

When a loss occurs due to an overdose, it can be tempting to avoid discussing the role of substance use disorder (SUD) in the death. However, it's essential to be honest with young people about the death of their loved ones to build trust and avoid reinforcing stigma and shame.

When discussing SUD and overdose, remember what is age appropriate. For younger children, you may need to explain in very simple terms what SUD is. You might say something like, "[Loved one]'s brain got very sick with a disease called substance use disorder, which caused them to feel really bad when they didn't take drugs or medication." On the other hand, teenagers likely have some knowledge of drugs and alcohol. Approach the topic of SUD like you would when talking to another adult.

For young people of all ages, be sure to emphasize that having an SUD didn't make their loved one bad and that they are not responsible for their loved one's substance use or death.^{1,2,3,4}

Normalize various emotions

When young people experience a loss, it may be their first experience with trauma, death, and grief. Experiencing these overwhelming emotions for the first time can be frightening, and young people may not know what coping strategies will help. Try to normalize the range of emotions that the young person in your life may be experiencing and allow them to express their feelings when and how they like. Teens may downplay their grief in front of others to fit in, so don't make them feel guilty for acting like nothing is wrong or expressing happiness when they feel like it. If they are open to it, help them brainstorm coping strategies and ways to grieve that work for them.

Remember that showing your emotions and grieving in front of young people is okay. Expressing your grief helps to normalize complicated feelings as part of the natural grieving process. However, try to be self-aware about the intensity of your emotions and avoid putting an adolescent in the situation of having to comfort you.^{1,3}

Be patient

Grief is complicated and looks different for everyone. Young people may seem self-focused or hesitant to share about their loss. They may struggle to understand the grief responses of others. Be available to them but try not to push too hard for them to talk about their feelings or to grieve in a certain way. You might offer to connect them with a support group of their peers or a counselor – teens may find it more comfortable to share in these spaces.

If you are grieving the loss as well, be patient with yourself. Take care of yourself and remember that you don't have to have all the answers. Just like on an airplane, you need to put on your own oxygen mask before you can help others. Don't forget to give yourself the same grace and support you want for your young person.^{1,3,6}

Resources

[Helping a Teenager Deal with Grief \(whatsyourgrief.com\)](https://whatsyourgrief.com)

[The Grief of an Overdose Death: Part 1 - What's your Grief](#)

[The Grief of an Overdose Death: Part 2 - What's your Grief](#)

[The Grief of an Overdose Death — and How You Can Support Someone Grieving a Substance Use Loss - Partnership to End Addiction \(drugfree.org\)](#)

[10 Helpful Tips for Talking with Children about the Drug-Related Death of a Loved One - What's your Grief](#)

[Superscript sources are hyperlinked at the start of this document](#)

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Anticipate difficult days

Young people have their whole lives ahead of them, which means that special moments and milestones, like birthdays, first jobs, and graduations, may be incredibly challenging without their loved ones. Let them know that it's okay to feel sad on these days, even if they are meant to be happy occasions. You might want to discuss ways to incorporate their loved one's memory into the day or event.

Additionally, if your community experiences another death due to an overdose, consider checking in with the young person in your life about their feelings.^{1,3}

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