

Stages of grief and how to support children



STAGES:

Grieving children experience a range of reactions when a loved one has died. Their natural grief reactions related to an overdose death may include the following:

Guilt or Regret: A child may think, “I should have made her stop drinking.”

Fear: A child may fear that other family members or friends will also experience an overdose.

Confusion: A child may experience confusion for many reasons, including 1) because they did not know their loved one was struggling with addiction; 2) mixed feelings of anger and love – anger at the person who overdosed but love for them at the same time; 3) trouble accepting that the death was due to an overdose; and 4) confusion as to whether the death was due to an accidental overdose or a suicide

Shame: They may feel that overdose deaths can have a stigma, which we aim to dispel. Even very young children may learn that what their person did was ‘wrong’ and feel embarrassed or ashamed when others find out.

Anger: A child may experience anger about the situation, anger in thinking that the deceased should have controlled it, and anger that the deceased contributed to their own death.

Reorganization and Resolution: When a child begins to accept the loss, they try to understand it and continue with their everyday life. The child may start to have more energy and is able to think clearly again.



SUPPORTING CHILDREN:

- Be patient, listen.
- Remain calm.
- Give space to the child when needed so that they can think through the loss.
- Realize that the child may fluctuate back and forth into stages of grief.
- Continue to be aware of changes to the child's behavior and mental state.
- Encourage the child to share their feelings as needed. Make yourself available when the child is ready to talk.
- Gain professional help from professionals to support mental health for you, your child, your family.

