



Coping With Grief Following The Unexpected Death Of A Loved One From Drugs And/Or Alcohol: A Step-By-Step Guide

Grieving the loss of a loved one to drug and alcohol abuse doesn't look the same for everyone. Understanding what to expect after experiencing loss, and how to move forward, can help you determine a path towards healing that feels right for you.



Drug and alcohol abuse is a widespread struggle across the United States. Over 21 million individuals nationwide are estimated to have a substance use disorder (SUD), including addiction to alcohol and opioids.

Without treatment, substance abuse can become life-threatening. From 1999 to 2018, nearly 450,000 people in the United States suffered a fatal opioid overdose. And in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, federal health agencies have reported an alarming spike in national opioid overdose deaths.

According to the American Medical Association (AMA), more than 40 states have reported increasing drug overdose deaths since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. This comes as addicted individuals are more isolated, and are potentially facing job loss, housing instability, and lesser access to substance abuse treatment services.

In addition to opioids, other deadly drugs include:

- [alcohol](#)
- [methamphetamine](#) (meth)
- [cocaine](#)
- benzodiazepines (e.g. Valium, Xanax)
- antidepressants
- other psychostimulants and sedatives

Most people who lose a loved one to drugs or alcohol enter a stage of grief. This is common and doesn't look the same for everyone. There is no single way to grieve or heal from this type of major loss.

You may be experiencing conflicted emotions in this time of mourning.

In this guide, you'll find information about:

- how to process the loss of a loved one to drug and alcohol abuse
- suggested steps on how to grieve your loss
- common causes of substance-abuse related death
- the scope of drug and alcohol abuse-related death
- looking forward in your process of healing from loss

How To Process The Loss Of A Loved One To Substance Abuse

After learning of the loss of a loved one to drug or alcohol abuse, the most important act you can do for yourself is to show yourself compassion. Allow yourself to experience initial reactions without judgment.



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- parents
- extended family members
- friends
- step-children or dependents
- coworkers

We all touch the lives of those around us, whether we're aware of it or not. The loss of a person can make many people realize the depth of their affection for a person, or how integral that person was to their life and sense of identity.

Processing through the initial news of a loved one's death can be overwhelming. Drug and alcohol addiction can ruin the lives of individuals and their loved ones, even before death.

In the first few days and weeks after your loss, your first steps forward may involve seeking support from others and discovering what the grieving process is going to look like for you based on your individual needs.

Steps For Healing From The Loss of A Loved One Due To Addiction

Grieving the loss of a loved one will vary by person. And not everyone will go through their stages of grief according to a single timeline. For some, grieving may be a lifelong process that, with time, can become easier to bear.

Mourning the death of a loved one whose life was taken by addiction, and healing from it, is a very personal process that may not be linear.

If you've recently lost a spouse, parent, child, or other loved one to drugs or alcohol—here are some suggested steps you can take to begin healing from your loss:

1. Reach Out For Support

Coping with a loss isn't easy or simple. Some people who experience loss may feel urged to isolate from others and mourn the loss of a loved one alone.

Choosing to give yourself space in these early days is a valid decision. However, it may also be important to recognize when giving yourself space may be doing more harm to your well-being than good.

No one is meant to grieve a significant loss alone. Depending on the relationships your loved one had with others, there may likely be others close to you, or to them, who are similarly in a state of mourning.

You might consider seeking support from:

- others affected by your loved one's death
- friends who are non-judgmental and can bring you comfort
- family members
- members of a grief support group
- local or national hotline for people who have experienced loss
- a professional grief counselor

Learning of the death of a loved one may cause you to shut down, physically and emotionally. You may be unable to speak, eat, sleep, or function in your daily routine as normal. This is not uncommon.

Seeking support when you can to help you through challenging stages of grief can be a critical way to take care of your physical, mental, and emotional well-being after experiencing loss. You may need help organizing a funeral for your loved one.

Maintain your connection with others through text, phone calls, or video calls. Tell others in your inner circle to reach out to you, so that the burden isn't on you to reach out first when you need help. Look inside yourself to determine what your needs are for connecting with others, and vocalize these to those who have expressed a desire to help you through this process.



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- anxiety
- confusion
- depression

These are common and valid grief reactions. You may feel numb, or you may cry for days on end. You may go through multiple cycles where you can't quite figure out how you're feeling, or your feelings about your loss may change.

Being unable to acknowledge, or accept loss isn't uncommon, and it isn't a sign of weakness. Getting to a place where you can acknowledge your loss and recognize that your loved one isn't coming back may be easier with the guidance of a friend, family member, or counselor.

3. Allow Yourself To Feel Everything

The truth is that addiction can complicate relationships. Your loved one may have become difficult to live with and love. Their drug or alcohol use may have created financial strain or caused them to become hostile, neglectful, or violent.

Many people assume that sadness is the only acceptable reaction to loss, but this isn't true. If you've lost a loved one whose addiction had caused significant hardship in your relationship, your grieving process may be more complicated.

Part of you may feel a sense of relief. Maybe you feel angry at your loved one or the world for not being able to give your loved one what they needed. You may find yourself cycling through a universe of various 'what ifs'.

In this time, give yourself unconditional permission to feel. Let yourself experience all of the emotions that arise during this process without judgment. Allow yourself to be angry, to be sad, confused, hopeless, and even happy in moments of joy.

Accepting joy in your life, and allowing yourself to heal from loss, doesn't ignore or do a disservice to your loved one's death. Give yourself permission to feel, and to mend.

4. Be Patient With Yourself

Experiencing loss can make it difficult for people to function as normal in their daily routines. You may have a difficult time concentrating, which can lead to challenges at work, in school, or in your social life. You may find yourself losing pleasure in activities or hobbies you used to enjoy.

Both simple and complicated tasks may come as a challenge. Be patient with yourself. Processing through a major loss, and regaining your ability to engage in life, may take months or even years.

Consider setting goals for yourself—to clean one day, or return to work, or to take a walk. Move forward one day at a time.

5. Find Meaning In Your Everyday Life

The only way out of an experience of personal tragedy is through. That isn't to say the process is easy or simple, or that you may even be able to find comfort in the places you have before.

For some, bereavement may be an opportunity to explore new outlets for expression and find greater meaning in your everyday life.

To process your loss and find meaning in your day-to-day, you might consider:

- keeping a journal
- learning an instrument
- trying new forms of physical exercise
- painting or drawing
- traveling
- volunteering in your community

Losing a loved one to addiction can, for some, also become a call-to-action. Many people involved in drug abuse prevention coalitions, alliances, and organizations are those who have personally been affected by drug and alcohol use.



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Common Causes Of Death Related To Substance Abuse And Addiction

Drug and alcohol abuse can affect virtually all aspects of a person's health. Frequent drug abuse can have detrimental effects on heart function, kidney function, liver function, and psychological health.

Abusing multiple substances, or taking excessive amounts of drugs regularly, may increase the risk of experiencing serious—and life-threatening—health consequences.

Causes of substance-abuse related deaths include:

- **Fatal Overdose:** One of the primary causes of drug-related deaths is fatal drug overdose. Overdose can occur when someone has taken too much of a drug in a short window of time or has mixed multiple drugs to create a deadly combination. Not every drug overdose is fatal. Overdose may be reversed with immediate medical treatment.
- **Organ Failure:** Heavy and chronic drug use can affect several vital organs, including the heart, kidneys, liver, and lungs. Over time, or in the event of an overdose, severe drug abuse may cause these organs to fail or become diseased.
- **Suicide:** Suicidal thoughts are a common consequence of heavy drug use. People may become suicidal due to the effects of drugs, or as a result of how their substance abuse has affected their lives. If a person feels unable to seek help or see a way out of their personal crisis, a person who is struggling with addiction may take their own life.
- **Driving While Intoxicated:** Thousands of motor vehicle accidents are linked to alcohol or drug use each year. When a person is intoxicated, they don't have the mental or physical capacity to appropriately operate a vehicle. This can result in serious accidents that might kill the intoxicated person who is driving, car passengers, pedestrians, or individuals in other vehicles involved in the accident.
- **Co-Occurring Medical Conditions:** Chronic drug and alcohol abuse is a major risk factor for [several serious health conditions](#), including various types of cancer, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS. Without treatment for certain health conditions (including substance abuse), these health issues may lead to fatal consequences.

Drug And Alcohol Abuse Death Rates

Understanding that you're not alone in your grief can be a helpful reminder during the grieving process. While it can be saddening to learn how many other people may be sharing your experience—a sense of loneliness in grief can also be painful.

The number of drug and alcohol-related deaths across the United States, and underlying drivers, varies by state and region.

Certain states, cities, and communities across the country have been more deeply affected by drug-related deaths, warranting strong responses from public health experts to address these devastating losses.

According to national drug and alcohol mortality data:

- **Alcohol Use:** In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported over 35,500 alcohol-related deaths nationwide, including alcohol-related accidents and homicides. An additional 22,000 U.S. residents died from alcoholic liver disease that same year.
- **Opioids:** Natural and synthetic opioids such as heroin, oxycodone, and fentanyl are involved in about 70 percent of total drug overdose deaths. Over 46,000 drug overdose deaths in 2018 were attributed to opioid misuse. Opioid overdose deaths have been highest in states such as Maryland, West Virginia, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Ohio.
- **Methamphetamine:** From 2012 to 2018, the number of drug-related deaths in the U.S. involving psychostimulants like meth increased five-fold, from 0.8 to 3.9 per 100,000 people. In 2018, this number totaled over 10,000 lives lost.
- **Other Drugs:** Drug overdose deaths involving drugs like cocaine and benzodiazepines have been on the rise in recent years. Benzodiazepines, which are commonly prescribed to treat anxiety and insomnia, are involved in about one-third of opioid overdose deaths.

What's Being Done To Address The Scope Of Drug-Related Deaths In The U.S.

The scope of drug and alcohol-related deaths has not gone unnoticed. Addressing substance abuse and drug-related deaths has become a priority for health departments nationwide.



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their resources to help individuals and families living with addiction.

The state of Massachusetts, for example, developed the Massachusetts Opioid Abuse Prevention Collaborative (MOAP) and Substance Abuse Prevention Collaborative (SAPC) to identify and implement effective substance use prevention initiatives.

Additional efforts to combat drug and alcohol abuse include:

- expanding supportive housing programs
- expanding community-based treatment options and supportive resources
- developing safe needle-exchange programs as part of a harm reduction approach to drug use
- making it easier for people to access naloxone (Narcan) in their communities as an emergency measure to help individuals quickly respond to an opioid overdose

Taking Care Of Yourself After The Death Of A Loved One

After losing a loved one to drug addiction, the most important thing you can do for yourself and those around you is to take care of your personal needs.

If you're a parent or a caretaker, this may be more of a challenge. Consider asking for help from friends or family to see if they can help you balance your caretaking responsibilities.

You may be able to find people in your life who are willing to help you cook, clean, sort through bills, and take care of children as you're going through the initial grieving process.

Allow Yourself Space To Mourn

Acknowledge that this is going to be a difficult time. Allow yourself comfort. Stay present in the moment if thinking of your loved one feels too painful. Thinking about your loved one, and your loss, may grow easier with time.

Seek External Support

Consider searching for local support groups for grief and loss. If you're unsure what supportive resources are available in your community, consider reaching out to a local hotline or your local health department to learn more about [available resources in your area](#).

Other sources of support might include:

- professional support from a grief counselor, who can help you learn supportive strategies for managing the difficulties that arise from your loss
- books on the subject of addiction-related grief and loss
- music and other artistic outlets
- local drug policy and prevention organizations

However hopeless or lost you may feel at times, you are not alone. Grieving the loss of a loved one and rebuilding your capacity for joy and pleasure may take time. But in the coming months, or years, you may eventually rediscover a sense of peace.

Be patient with yourself and compassionate. And look forward—your future is waiting.

Questions About Treatment?

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