

TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ABOUT DEATH FROM A SUBSTANCE

- Don't avoid the topic. If a child or youth is ready to talk about their family member's death from an accidental substance death or an addiction, they need compassionate, fully present listeners.
- Allow the child or youth to share as much of their story as they are ready for and be open to hearing without judgment, regardless of the cause and circumstances.
- If the death was an unintentional overdose, a way to explain this to children is that some people use a drug or alcohol because they think it is going to make them feel good, but it caused their person's body to stop working.
- Reassure the child/youth that medicines given by a doctor when they are ill or have a physical injury are good medicines and will help heal, not hurt them.
- If the death was from pharmaceutical medical error, it is natural for the child/youth to be very distrusting of prescriptions for a while. It can be helpful to put the error in perspective as a rare occurrence, but the child/youth will likely need understanding, patience, and time to overcome their wariness of medications and doctors.
- Explain that for some people who have a dependency to a drug or alcohol, their brain makes them want more and more of it. Their person who died probably wanted to quit but the addiction made it extremely difficult to stop.
- For a younger child, explain that the addiction sickness can cause big bad moods, upsets, or sleepiness. Explain that the behaviour of the person who died was not because the child or youth did something wrong, nor was the addiction disease the child's fault.
- Children and youth can feel very torn in their relationship with the person who died, between their love and their more difficult or volatile feelings. Be careful never to minimize those feelings. They need to be free to express in order to process their grief.
- If the person who died lived with addiction, explain that some people use a substance to temporarily stop or numb their upsetting or painful feelings and thoughts.
- Some children and youth worry they will develop addictions too. Reassure them that there are ways to prevent addiction. Encourage them to think, talk about, and practice ways to 'get out' their own upset feelings and thoughts (ie, talk to a caring adult or friend, keep a journal, express through art, physical activity, or music).
- Continue to reach out and remind them that you are available to listen about anything that is a concern to them.

At times we are still angry at them, sometimes at ourselves. Now that they have passed, we can own those feelings, but we can also hold them in our hearts with compassion and love. They did the best they could. We did the best we could. They tried. We tried. We did not fail.

- Elaine Faulkner, Chemical Dependence Professional (CDP) and bereaved mother

Books for Grieving Loss from Substances

A Terrible Thing Happened: A Story for Children Who Have Witnessed Violence or Trauma by Margaret M Holmes (child storybook)

Someone I Love Died from a Drug Overdose by Melody Ray, Illustrated by R Lynn O. (child storybook)

Understanding Your Grief after a Drug Overdose Death by Alan Wolfelt

Grief Diaries: Surviving Loss by Overdose by Lynda Cheldelin Fell

Hooked: When Addiction Hits Home Edited by Chloe Shantz-Hilkes, Introduction by Robert Munsch

I Am Your Disease: The Many Faces of Addiction by Sheryl Letzgas McGinnis, with Heiko Ganzer

When a Child Dies From Drugs: Practical Help for Parents in Bereavement by Patricia Wittberger and Russ Wittberger

Death by Prescription by Terrance Young

At Lighthouse, we recognize that communities are diverse, and grief will look different across and within cultures as well as within families, from the way it's experienced to the way it is expressed. There is no right or wrong way to confront end of life and grief. Taking a culturally humble approach by allowing a family to teach us about their needs and their grief process, helps us to learn how to offer support that is meaningful. If you know a child or youth who has experienced a recent death, Lighthouse for Grieving Children and Families offers phone and in-person consultations to discuss the situation and assist with creating a support plan.