

CHILDREN AND YOUTH NEED NON-JUDGMENTAL CARE AND SUPPORT AFTER DEATH LOSS FROM SUBSTANCES

- Whether the death happened from a pharmacological error, poisoning from laced recreational drugs, an accidental or intentional overdose, or an addiction related illness, the sudden loss of a family member from substances is devastating to all who loved them. For children and youth, the death of a parent or sibling from a substance often brings confusion and questions about how and why this could happen. If the person had a chemical dependency addiction, the stigma and tendency toward secrecy sends a message to children, youth, and other family members that it is something to feel ashamed about. This leaves them and their parent(s) reluctant to share the cause of death, and prevents them from mourning openly.
- At Lighthouse, grieving children, youth, and their parent(s) continue to teach us about the impacts of their losses. Children and youth who are grieving a substance death need care and understanding from the adults in their life. Here are some things to keep in mind when providing support to a family grieving a death from a substance:

The sudden, shocking circumstances of a substance related death can cause trauma, which may delay and interfere with the grieving process.
- Families need acceptance of all feelings and behaviours, not just sadness. They may feel confusion, fear, shame, self blame, embarrassment, rage, or relief.
- A child or youth may feel the need to defend and demonstrate loyalty to the person who died, especially in the face of other peoples' negative comments or judgments.
- Children or youths may become distrustful of the medical system, especially if the person died from a medication error. They often develop fears for their own well-being and safety, especially regarding taking medicines.
- Families often do not get all the answers they need to understand the cause of death, which makes their grieving process more difficult and complicated.
- Bereaved Parents of children and youth with addictions are described as experiencing a 'double death' loss. The child/youth often shows a change in personality, behaviours that breakdown trust, and/or an avoidance of responsibilities, resulting in the parent losing the relationship with the child during the addiction. They grieve a further loss when their child dies.
- It is important to be mindful about our assumptions. An apparent overdose death may actually be poisoning: recreational drugs which have been laced with a deadly substance, without the person's awareness.
- Our own attitudes and biases about addictions affect how we respond to others. By understanding and accepting that addiction is a disease, we are able to convey more compassion toward the person who died, and to their grieving family members.
- Accidental overdose deaths can often happen after a period of abstinence, adding to the shock for family members.
- If the person who died had addiction issues, the child or youth may become angry toward them for not seeking help. They might be resentful toward the surviving parent(s) for what they perceive as not taking action, or hatred toward people who provided the substance.
- If the person died from addiction, the child or youth's grief can be complicated by feelings of relief, especially if there was conflict in the home which ended after the death.
- Often, a child or youth will blame themselves for not being able to save the person who died.

