



– Sherry, lost her 18-year old son, Richard, to an overdose

Find Grief Support in Massachusetts

Find the support that works for you. You can search these groups by focus, ZIP code, and whether they meet in person or virtually.

Groups are led by others who share a similar grief experience.

Support After a Death by Overdose (SADOD) has gathered a directory of peer grief support groups in Massachusetts. Find the group that is right for you or share additional groups so that everyone can find the support that they need.

Visit the guide at:

bit.ly/sadodgroups



Surviving the Grief of an Overdose Death

The death of a loved one is always devastating. When that loss is the result of an overdose, there can be emotions that bring unique challenges in addition to the typical symptoms of grief. The point of this short booklet isn't to give you *all* the information that may be helpful for you in the months or years to come. Instead, we hope this booklet can help you do three things. First, we'll explain some of the common emotions that come with a substance-related death. Second, we'll provide you with some quick tips for seeking support in your own community. And third, we'll direct you to additional resources on the Internet that may be of support.

As more and more people are affected by drug and alcohol addiction, more and more families are left to grieve an overdose death. Did you know overdose deaths outnumber traffic fatalities in the U.S.? Someone dies every 8 minutes from a drug overdose in this country. In 2011, prescription medication overdose deaths outnumbered heroin and cocaine deaths combined. Drug overdose deaths outnumber prostate cancer deaths and breast cancer deaths.

Sadly, it remains difficult to find resources for those grieving a loved one's death from overdose due to stigma and lack of awareness. We hope this booklet will serve as a jumping-off point by providing you with some basic information and pointing you in the right direction to seek additional support.



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Common Emotions When Grieving an Overdose Death

When grieving an overdose death, you will likely experience some of the common emotions that come with grief: sadness, loneliness, yearning, anger, confusion, and isolation. But with a substance-related loss there are additional common emotions that arise which may not be discussed as often in generalized resources about grief. Below, we discuss some of the emotions that are shared by people who are grieving an overdose death. Keep in mind that this list is not comprehensive; you may experience other emotions as well.

Feeling the Death was Avoidable or Preventable

Grief about overdose deaths, much like suicide grief, is complex because people feel like the death was somehow preventable. This can create an array of complicated emotions, many of which can be linked back to this feeling or belief. Many of the feelings listed below—including guilt, shame, blame, fear, and isolation—can all, in some way, be connected back to this central idea that this death could have or should have been prevented.

Guilt

Though guilt can be a component of grief for many types of losses, the guilt associated with overdose deaths can present itself in different ways:

- Guilt that you could have done something to prevent the loss.
- Guilt that your loved one suffered from addiction.
- Guilt if the death brings a sense of relief.
- Guilt that you were not aware of their drug use or substance dependence.

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Shame

Guilt is something we feel within ourselves, based on our own perception of what we could or should have done in a certain situation. Shame is something we feel based on our perception of what others think of us. In the case of an overdose death, shame can manifest in various ways:

- Shame that your loved one suffered from addiction.
- Shame for enabling your loved one.
- Shame for not doing enough to "help" your loved one.
- Shame for the person who died (feeling that others blame that person).

Blame

Self-blame, as well as blame between friends and family members, can be common following an overdose death. Research has shown that there is a greater incidence of blame among parents who have lost a child to overdose or suicide than other types of loss (Feigelman, Jordan and Gorman, 2011). Some common feelings that arise around blame are:

- Blame toward those who used drugs and/or alcohol with the person who died.
- Blame toward yourself for allowing the person to develop an addiction.
- Blame toward yourself for the person's death.
- Blame toward the person who died for his or her own addiction or death.
- Blame toward family members for not preventing the death.

Stigma and Isolation

Though we know addiction touches hundreds of thousands of families each year, the family and friends of those experiencing addiction often suffer in silence due to the feelings of stigma, guilt and shame. This can result in:

- Difficulty accepting the circumstances of the death (for example, being in denial about the person's involvement with drugs).
- Reluctance to openly discuss the cause of death.
- Reluctance to participate in support groups or counseling.
- Hesitance to seek support from friends and family members.

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Fear and Anxiety

Once someone has lost a family member to addiction, anxieties can arise or increase. These anxieties can include:

- Fear that other family members will start abusing substances.
- Fear that others who are already using substances will also overdose.
- Fear that others who are in recovery will relapse.

If you are experiencing these emotions listed above in addition to the other, countless feelings that come along with grief, you may be wondering what you can do.

"My mom passed away from an overdose when I was 17, and now in my 30s I still feel at a loss for words when a new friend or acquaintance asks me how she died."

— Amy, lost her mom to an overdose

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HONORING THE MANY



In memory of those who have died from substance-use-related causes in the U.S.

Honoring the Many is a free memorial website created by SADOD (Support After a Death by Overdose) "because people who die from substance use deserve to be honored and remembered — and those who are left behind to mourn their loss deserve to know that they are not alone."

Anyone is welcome to submit a memorial at honoringthemanymany.org



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What Can You Do About These Complicated Emotions?

We wish there was an easy answer to this question, but there's not. We all deal with grief in our own time and in our own way. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve, but there are some activities you can do that may be helpful. If you find that none of these work for you, don't be discouraged. Try visiting a counselor or a support group, or look for ideas online. You can visit our websites—whatsyourgrief.com and sadod.org—as a place to start.

Accept the Role of Substances in the Death

We often deny to ourselves and to others the role of drugs in our loved one's death because it feels easier that way. However, it's important to be honest with ourselves about the circumstances of the loss in order to address the complicated feelings we might have. If you need a push, you can commit to accepting the circumstances of the death in honor of International Overdose Awareness Day, held on August 31. You need to decide what is right for you, but one possibility is to leave a tribute to the person you have lost to an overdose on the International Overdose Awareness Day website. There are hundreds of thousands of incredible people whose lives have been lost to an overdose. Their addiction and their overdose do not change the fact that they were people we loved, people we remember, and people we grieve. When you add your tribute to the website, sharing who your loved one was and how they died, you help change the stigma, blame, isolation, and shame that often accompany an overdose death. Each tribute on the website remembers someone who was loved and who is deeply missed. The simple act of posting a tribute on the site is an acknowledgment of the circumstances of the loss and a step toward accepting the reality of the nature of the loss. This is one of many small things you can do to begin the process of accepting and acknowledging the death as an overdose death.

Find a Form of Expression

Find some way that you can express the emotions that come with an addiction and drug-related death. Do you need to yell from the rooftops? No. You may not even be ready to talk about it at all. Maybe you will discover that writing, art, music or

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photography is a helpful form of expression for you. Or, maybe you will find a family member, friend, or counselor to confide in. But one way or the other, start working toward a place where you can express your feelings about the addiction and overdose.

Understand Addiction

Most of us will always have some feelings of guilt and self-blame for an overdose death, and that is okay. Really. Grief and guilt are not rational, so we cannot reason them away. But understanding addiction itself can help us keep our guilt within a normal, manageable range rather than allowing ourselves to spiral out of control, obsess, or become consumed by anxiety. Understanding addiction as a disease can help us identify that our feelings of guilt and blame are often misplaced. People will always say uneducated things about addiction and overdose losses. Being educated about these topics can assist us in feeling empowered to address the myths and misconceptions about addiction and overdose.

Stand Up For Yourself

The research of Feigleman et al (2011) demonstrated that "openly challeng[ing] unhelpful but well-intentioned efforts among intimate associates may help these survivors to establish more supportive environments for their healing among their families and friends." In other words, it's important to speak up and tell your friends and family when their "well-intentioned" comments are hurtful instead of helpful. This may not be our immediate inclination. We often let insensitive comments slide, though we may ruminate about them later. You may think you're being nice and polite by keeping your mouth shut, but in reality, it's probably more helpful to point out how hurtful someone's comment was. They'll know how to better handle situations like this in the future, and you'll feel better because you will have openly and honestly expressed your emotions. So, if you are not feeling supported by the comments of friends and family, tell them! They may not realize how hurtful or unkind their well-intentioned words or actions are. It may both help them be a better emotional support for you and also prevent them from making similar insensitive comments in the future.

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Avoid People Who Aren't Helping

Even after you talk with them, some friends and family members will continue to be part of the problem. They may imply that an overdose death is a less-important death, or that the life of someone suffering addiction is somehow less worthy of mourning. If you do what we suggest above—give them feedback, stand up for yourself, ask them for the kinds of support you need—and they continue to give you more harm than support, avoid them. It is okay to give yourself permission to get some space away from people who are not helping you in your grief. Depending on your relationship with that person, you may want or need to cut ties with them with the hopes of reintroducing them into your life in the future. For now, you need to focus on being surrounded by people who are supporting you.

Find A Counselor

You may be wondering how to go about finding people who can support you in your grief. Though finding a counselor can feel overwhelming, there are some easy steps you can take to find a counselor who is right for you.

Call Your Local Hospice

Many people don't realize that hospices often offer grief counseling services. Typically, these services are not only for families of hospice patients, but also for anyone in need of grief support. Hospices often accept insurance and offer affordable private rates, sometimes on a sliding income scale. Some hospices even offer a limited number of free grief counseling sessions.

Ask For Recommendations

If you know someone who has been through a loss and has seen a grief counselor, ask for a recommendation. You may also consider asking your primary care physician or calling your insurance company if you are insured.

Look For A Support Group

Your hospice may run grief support groups, or you may find them at local hospitals or counseling centers. Often, all it takes to point you in the right direction is a quick Google search or a phone call to local hospices and hospitals. It may be difficult to find specific overdose support groups in your area, but it is worth trying.

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Share Grief Support With Others

Share these booklets and SADOD wallet cards with anyone who will benefit from them. They are shipped free to addresses in Massachusetts.

This card links people to:

- Essentials for newly bereaved people: bit.ly/basicgriefinfo
- Quick guide to the SADOD website: bit.ly/sadodquick
- Searchable grief support group directory: bit.ly/sadodgroups
- Memorial website: honoringtheman.org

Request these free resources at:

SADOD.org/free-cards



GRIEF RESOURCES

After a Death from Substance Use

For Newly Bereaved People bit.ly/basicgriefinfo	Grief Support Group Directory bit.ly/sadodgroups
Quick Guide to SADOD Website bit.ly/sadodquick	MA Substance Use Helpline 800-327-5050

SADOD
617-982-2150 moreinfo@sadod.org

SADOD.ORG

SADOD is a Massachusetts peer grief support program for people bereaved by a death from substance use, including accidental overdose, suicide, homicide, medical condition, or other accident.

honoringtheman.org

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Learn About Resources Specific To Substance-Related Loss

Though it may feel like you are all alone, there are organizations and resources specifically designed for people who are grieving substance overdose deaths:

GRASP (Grief Recovery After Substance Passing) is an organization designed to support those who are grieving an overdose death. GRASP has groups that meet all across the country. You can look for a group near you on their website www.grasphelp.org

Broken No More has online forums, articles, and resources for those grieving substance abuse deaths. They also work to change the stigma around addiction. It is a great organization to get involved with if you are looking to do some activism around substance abuse and overdose. Visit their website at www.broken-no-more.org

Moms Tell gives information about substance abuse treatment, recovery, education, and prevention. This website also explains and highlights legislation and policy issues related to substance abuse. It was founded by a group of moms who lost children to an overdose and has been active for 15 years. They can be found online at www.momstelli.org

Al-anon and **Nar-anon** are peer support groups for family members of those suffering from alcoholism or addiction. Though they are not grief groups, many people find support in these groups while a family member is struggling with addiction or following drug and alcohol addiction deaths. You can find them online at www.nar-anon.org and www.al-anon.alateen.org

Last but not least... visit our website! **What's Your Grief** is a grief and bereavement blog that has articles specifically related to substance-related losses, in addition to hundreds of general articles about grief and bereavement. We pride ourselves on providing practical, concrete and creative resources that real people can relate to. SADOD's website has useful information specific to grieving a substance-use related death.

whatsyourgrief.com

sadod.org

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"My blog, *The Reluctant Grandmother*, now is my daily therapy, mostly charting where I am at in this ocean of grief. I've found a lot of mothers who are enduring the same pain and we help hold one another up in ways that even others who have lost children cannot do. I strongly recommend a journal or therapy and support groups where you can find parents suffering as you are."

— Angela, lost her 23 year old son, Ethan, to an overdose

SADOD Has More Information For The Newly Bereaved

visit bit.ly/basicgriefinfo

SADOD Newsletter



Peer Grief Support VOICES

Sign up for the SADOD newsletter at bit.ly/listsadod

Access the newsletter archive by visiting sadod.org/newsletter



WHATSYOURGRIEF.COM
SADOD.ORG

