



# Supporting Children after the Overdose Death of a Family Member

# The statistics are staggering ...

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- From 1990–2015, more than 560,000 people died due to drug overdoses.
- In 2015 alone, 2/3 of drug overdoses were linked to opioids.
- Since 1999, the number of American overdose deaths has quadrupled.
- Approximately 110 Americans die every day from a drug overdose.
- Overdose rates are highest among people 25–54.

In a report by the Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis, it was stated that:

- “Drug overdoses now kill more people than gun homicides and car crashes combined.”

According to an analysis by *The New York Times*:

- As many as 65,000 people died from drug overdoses in the US in 2016 (likely under-reported), the “leading cause of death among Americans under 50.”





Yet, even with so many  
suffering in this way,  
you've never felt  
more alone ...



# Heartbreak after Heartbreak

When someone we love or care about dies of an overdose, often there has been a series of heartbreaks that ends in this final tragedy.

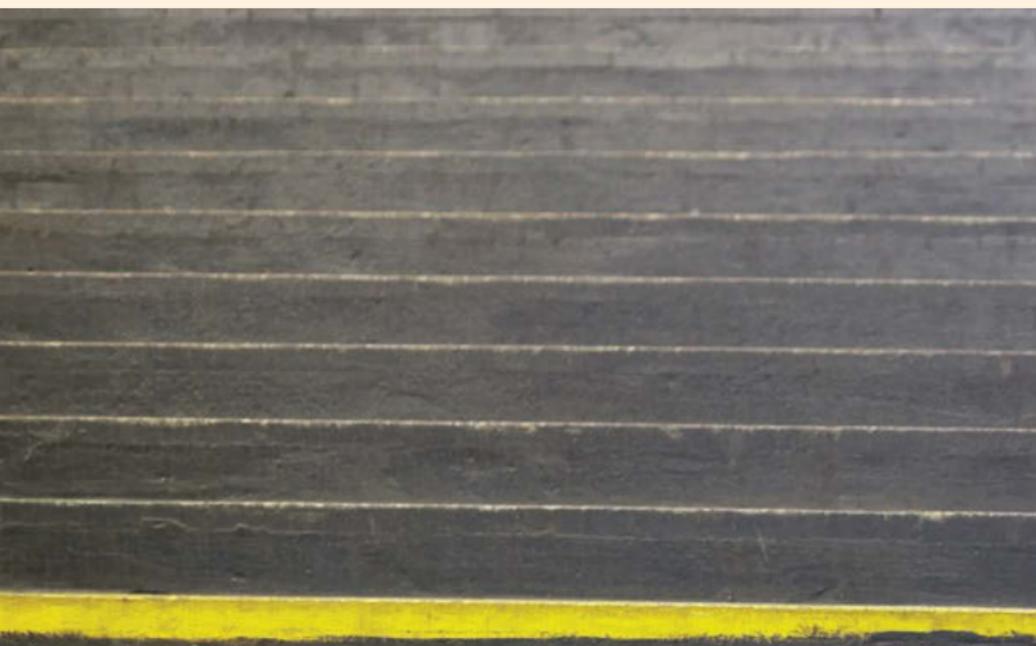
After the death, the difficult journey continues for family and friends. Our reaction to that death — our grief — reaches into every part of our lives.

This grief can be larger — more difficult and longer lasting — than most people imagine it would be.

As we grieve, we search for answers and for meaning in what has happened, and search for ways to cope with the complicated feelings that accompany a death due to addiction and overdose.

**So often family members are left with *many questions ...***

- Did I do enough?
- Did I do too much?
- Was it my fault?
- Did I fail my loved one?
- How could this have happened?
- What if ...?



... and with *many feelings*:

- **Anger** — at the person who died; at anyone involved with his or her addiction; at the treatment for not working; at ourselves....
- **Guilt** — no matter what we did, there will be a feeling of needing to have done something more, or something different; that somehow we could have prevented the death, even though it really wasn't within our control.
- **Shame** — families with a loved one who is an addict often feel shame at their behavior and/or at our own inability to help them; we can also feel as if we are "bad" parents, siblings, children, etc.
- **Stigma** — to complicate matters, there is often a stigma that accompanies addiction, born out of ignorance. While addiction has been shown to be a disease of the brain, there continue to be those who see addiction as caused by a weakness in character, or a lack of self-discipline. In addition, because they don't know what to say or do, those whom we count on may avoid us, leaving us to feel more alone than ever.



# Talking with the Children

Finding the words to talk to children when someone dies is one of the most difficult situations we can ever face. The complicated feelings that follow a death by an overdose — anger, shame and guilt — make talking with the children under these circumstances even harder.

And the stigma that you feel — they will feel it too. That's why, as hard as it may be, it is so important that children feel safe at home to ask questions and to talk about their loved one.

Prior to talking with a child, we need to decide how we want to explain an overdose to him or her. (Information online can help with language to explain addiction and overdose to children.)

Even though our instincts may be to shelter the children from the pain of reality, children trust their parents and other adults in their lives to tell them the truth.

Our attempts at protecting them through vague answers, or with stories that are only partly true, can lead to children imagining scenarios that are much scarier than the reality was. These efforts can also be seen as a betrayal; teens especially have the ability to see when we aren't being honest with them and may shut down attempts at communication.

Children of different ages will want to know different things. A good way to open the conversation is to ask, "What have you been thinking about \_\_\_\_\_'s death?"

We can also begin with a basic explanation of how their loved one died, and let them guide us from there with their follow up questions. For younger children, it's important to keep it simple. Older kids and teens can understand and process more.

For younger children, it can be helpful to give them the words they are comfortable with which they can then use when their friends ask how their family member died.

All children need to be listened to and heard. Being listened to — and feeling listened to — is one of the most important ways that we all feel cared for and valued.

The goal of this listening is to have the child feel heard and understood and validated.





# Validating the Children

It is important to validate the child's feelings — whatever they are — and invite them to continue talking to us about how they feel.

We also need to remember that this won't be over in one conversation. We will need to prepare ourselves for many conversations as we and our children seek together to understand and to find hope again in the future.

We can prepare ourselves for many more talks, many more questions — in fact, we can tell the children specifically that it is OK to ask questions.

Regardless of what we say and how we say it, it is important that our children know they did not cause the death (or the addiction), nor could they have done anything to have stopped it from happening.

Because life with a person suffering from addiction is complicated, we can expect our children to have many different feelings toward their loved one and how they died.



Looking for answers is a common search for meaning about something that often feels senseless. It's important that a grieving child get the sense that it's OK to ask questions, and that we are not shocked or upset or angry that they are dealing with these hard things.

And because some questions may not have ready answers, it is important to remember that saying "I don't know" is OK. For the child, feeling heard, validated and understood will be the most important results from any conversation.

We won't have all of the answers and we can't "fix it" for them. However, listening to a grieving child, truly hearing them, is a true gift we can give them because it's likely they can't talk about what has happened anywhere else.

And while we may not always feel like we have the "right" words, be assured that what is most important is that they can come to us. Our love and sincerity will speak louder than the words they will hear.

Knowing we are there with them and for them will often be all the "answer" they need.

“It is only natural that we and our children find many things hard to talk about.

But anything human is mentionable and anything mentionable can be manageable.

The mentioning can be difficult, and the managing too, but both can be done if we’re surrounded by love and trust.”

— **Fred Rogers**

*Honorary Chairman, Caring Foundation,  
from 1985 until his death in 2003*

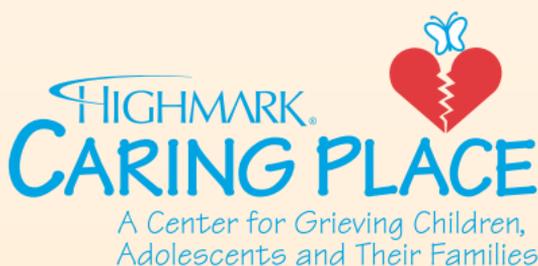


# About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



is a program of



## Pittsburgh

620 Stanwix Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
(888) 224-4673

## Erie

510 Cranberry St., Bldg 2  
Erie, PA 16507  
(866) 212-4673

## Central PA

3 Walnut Street, Suite 200  
Lemoyne, PA 17043  
(866) 613-4673

## Warrendale

200 Warrendale Village Drive  
Warrendale, PA 15086  
(888) 734-4073

[HighmarkCaringPlace.com](http://HighmarkCaringPlace.com) | [#HighmarkCaringPlace](https://twitter.com/HighmarkCaringPlace)