

The Initial Impact

The death of a child at any age from any cause has a debilitating effect on a parent. When the cause of death is substance-related, a number of additional factors, such as guilt, anger, blame, depression, and stigmatization, may complicate the grieving process. Some parents may nonetheless find comfort in knowing that their child is finally at peace, and no longer struggling.

Guilt

Most bereaved parents feel guilty about surviving the death of their child. As parents we are meant to be our children's protectors. We are not meant to outlive them. The death of a child from substance abuse may have come after attempts by parents to "cure" their child's addiction. The failure to do so may lead to self-blame, causing a parent to second-guess or judge their own actions. If the death through drugs or alcohol came as a surprise to the parents, they may feel guilty for not knowing their child was using. If the child spent years battling an addiction, a

parent might even feel a sense of relief that the struggle is now over. This, too, could contribute to feelings of guilt. A bereaved parent may have to live with these feelings for a long time. Try to remember that you did your best to protect your child and that no parent is all-powerful.

The Question of Suicide

In some cases of substance-use related death, there may be a question of suicide. Did the child mean to overdose? An inquest may settle this question, or it may not. If parents suspect the overdose was intentional, they may find a suicide survivors' group helpful, as well as The Compassionate Friends pamphlet *"My Child Died by Suicide"*.

Anger

Anger is recognized as a natural reaction in confronting the death of a loved one. If your child died through drugs or alcohol, you may be angry at the friends or dealers who supplied and encouraged the use. You may even feel anger at your child for using. Try to find a safe way of venting your anger, such as

breaking dishes, beating drums, stomping through a forest, or writing nasty letters and tearing them up. You can positively redirect anger at a system that didn't support you by advocating for reform.

Stigmatization

Society, even friends and family, may judge you and your child for the way your child died. You may not want to share the cause of death with strangers. Meeting parents whose children have died in similar circumstances, or joining an advocacy group, may help you feel less judged. Remember the other, more positive, parts of your child's life and personality and share these.



Recovering and Reinvesting in Life

Encourage family members to share their pain with one another and to remember the good times they had with the deceased. Don't be afraid to discuss the addiction or the cause of death with those close to you. Especially include any surviving children as their mutual support will help you both. Combat stigmatization by trying to understand the "why" of your child's death, even though you may never be completely sure of their state of mind or how social pressures may have contributed to their addiction. Join a support group such as The Compassionate Friends where you can safely share your feelings with others who have had similar experiences. You may even find distant friends through The Compassionate Friends closed Facebook groups. Find a way to honour your child's life through a bench, a tree, a scholarship, or writing stories about them. Write a letter to your child declaring your love, your grief, your anger, and, if you can, your forgiveness. However your child died, remember that love is much stronger than death.

Swallowed Beauty

*She was young, she was fair,
Rosy cheeks and luscious hair.
She loved music, dance and art,
Whoever thought she'd fall apart?
But some demon took control
Swallowed up her beauty whole.
Now her loved ones ache and weep
Rocking her soul in endless sleep.*

Cathy Sosnowsky,
North Vancouver, BC

*In honour of Andrea, Amora, Lucie, Taylor,
Mia, Sebastian, Matt, Steven, and Erik.
All beloved children.*

For support in your area contact:



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Grief after a Substance-related Death



THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA

An international peer support
organization for bereaved parents
and their surviving children