

# When someone you know has overdosed

**Drug overdose not only affects those who have died—it also affects family members and loved ones left behind.**

Around 42% of U.S. adults know someone who has died from a drug overdose. Overdose-related deaths are often sudden and cause extreme grief for the deceased's family and friends.

Individuals struggling with drug misuse are more likely to keep their habit and whereabouts a secret from family and friends. Those left behind are often unaware their loved one was using drugs or had challenges with addiction. This can lead to feelings of distress and guilt for not noticing signs or intervening to prevent the person's death.

## **How to cope with loss after someone overdoses**

Death caused by an overdose, whether the person meant to or not, is a distressing situation that requires care, compassion and support for those left behind. Here are some helpful ways to cope with the trauma of losing someone to a drug overdose.

- **Think about getting therapy.** Loss of a loved one to a drug overdose can have a lasting impact on you and your family. The effects may vary from person to person. Therapy can help everyone address and process emotions.
- **Check for and join in self-help activities.** Practices, such as mindfulness meditation, journaling and exercise, can help with managing the stress and grief you may feel. These wellness practices are helpful tools for building emotional strength and personal development.
- **Practice self-compassion.** Drug overdose is often perceived as being preventable, even though addiction and substance use disorders are recognized as mental illnesses. Remember to be patient and compassionate with

yourself. The process of grieving and healing takes time.

- **Join support groups.** Connecting with individuals who have experienced a similar situation may help you feel understood. You can support each other and share real-life stories that promote hopefulness and strength to get through this challenging time.
- **Find meaningful ways to honor your loved one's memory.** You can cherish and remember good times shared with your loved one by supporting a cause they were passionate about, going through photographs, remembering happier times, or keeping something of theirs close to you.

Allowing yourself time and space to process your emotions is essential for coping with grief. There may be times when you feel guilty for not recognizing your loved one's struggles with drug misuse or being unable to help them. However, this tragedy is not your fault. While you can't bring your loved one back, you can make a difference by being alert and noticing the signs of drug misuse and overdose in others, potentially saving another life.

### **Drug misuse warning signs**

People who misuse drugs frequently try to hide their symptoms. Here are some warning signs:

#### **Physical**

- Red/ bloodshot eyes or pupils larger or smaller than normal
- Slurred speech and/or impaired coordination
- Unusual odors from their body or clothes
- Change in weight

#### **Behavioral**

- Demonstrating conduct changes and mood swings (e.g., arguing, fighting or conflicts with authority)

- Avoiding once-pleasurable activities
- Appearing anxious or fearful for no reason
- Struggling financially (e.g., unexplained need for and willingness to steal money)
- Making changes in friends
- Fluctuating sleep patterns or appetite
- Behaving secretively
- Neglecting home, work or school duties

### **What to do if you think someone has overdosed**

- Call 911 right away!
- Check for overdose symptoms:
  - Unresponsive or appears lifeless
  - Absence of breathing or shallow/slow breaths
  - Gasping for air or snoring
  - Blue lips and fingertips
  - Clammy skin
- Turn the person over to their side to help avoid choking.
- Check for any visible drugs or bottles that may have caused the overdose.
- Stay with the person until emergency responders arrive.
- Perform chest compressions if there's no sign of breathing or pulse.

If you have a loved one using opioids, learn more about Naloxone, a medication that reverses opioid overdose. [The National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) has a drug facts page and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) offers an [Opioid Overdose Prevention Toolkit](#) that can be downloaded.

### **Resources for bereaved families and loved ones**

#### **Mental health and substance misuse support:**

- [Crisis Call Center](#): 800-273-8255 or 988
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services](#)

[Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) provides resources and free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information services, including a National Helpline:

- Phone: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Website: [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)

### **Support for grieving individuals and families:**

- [Griefshare](#) is a worldwide directory of support groups for people grieving the death of a family member or friend.
- [National Alliance for Children's Grief](#) provides a directory of programs and support groups for children dealing with grief and loss.
- [National Funeral Directors Association](#) provides resources from community experts.
- [The Compassionate Friends](#) provides support for people who have experienced the death of a child.
- [What's Your Grief](#) is a website devoted to families who are going through grief and loss.

**For more mental health resources, visit [magellanhealthcare.com/about/bh-resources](https://www.magellanhealthcare.com/about/bh-resources).**

*This article is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.*

### **SOURCES:**

- <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/21/health/us-adults-overdose-survey/index.html>
- <https://www.ihs.gov/asap/familyfriends/warningsignsdrug/>
- <https://mountainside.com/blog/secretcy-in-addiction/>
- <https://sadod.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/How-to-Help-Newly-Bereaved.pdf>