



What Not to Say Following a Death by Overdose or Suicide

It can be hard enough to know what to say, or what not to say, when someone we know is grieving. Stigma surrounding certain types of death can make this feel even harder. Use the below as a guide to help offer support to someone you know following a stigmatized death.

Steer clear of rumors or gossip

Sadly, when someone dies by suicide or as the result of a drug overdose, it is not uncommon for there to be gossip or rumors in the community. It is critically important to remember that those rumors and gossip are harmful and unnecessary, and will contribute to the pain that the grieving family is feeling. When you are offering your condolences or support to a grieving person, seek to do only that. Do not share about things you may have heard, or ask them to confirm or deny things that are being said in the community.

If the person brings up rumors or gossip that they have heard, acknowledge how painful it must be for them to experience that and then offer quiet, listening presence. If they ask if you have heard any rumors or gossip about their loved one's death, it is not necessary to lie but try to keep your focus on the grieving person. Offer that you are aware that some people are talking about the death and ask them if there is something that they would like you to do or say if you are confronted with gossip or misinformation.

Be aware of your own bias

It is also important to remember that addiction and mental illnesses can be chronic, life threatening illnesses in the same way physical illnesses can be. We all may carry biases, assumptions, and judgements about addiction or mental illness that have been informed by our society and culture. When you hear that someone has died as a result of suicide or drug overdose, be mindful of what thoughts and feelings it brings up for you. If you find that you are attributing negative values to these deaths, like that the person who died was selfish, weak, or lacked self control, gently acknowledge those thoughts as the misperceptions that they are and challenge yourself to change this way of thinking.



Be aware of your own bias (cont...)

It is never compassionate or helpful to share thoughts or judgements like this with a grieving person. Seek again to keep your focus on the griever and how they are feeling as they begin their grief journey. Though it is normal to want to process your own sense of shock over the death or the complicated feelings it may bring up for you, this is best done on your own time in the confidence of a very trusted friend or a mental health professional.

Be mindful of boundaries with children and teens

At A Haven we believe that age appropriate truth and transparency are the best way to protect and connect with children when talking about a death. We also recognize that this feels hard following a shocking or stigmatized death. If you are aware that a family has chosen to hide or alter some details about the way someone has died when talking to their children or teens, be compassionate and respectful of that choice. You do not need to correct that information. Focus on offering your supportive, listening presence to the grieving child or teen with no judgement over what they think or may have been told.

If a child or teen asks you how their person died or if you have additional information you can give them, redirect them gently back to their caregiver. Something simple like *"That's a good question and I don't have all of the answers. Your Mom/Dad/Aunt/whoever would be the best person to ask about that,"* is sufficient. Then follow up with the caregiver or another trusted adult to let them know that their child has been asking you about the death so that they are not caught off guard. A Haven can help to facilitate these difficult conversations for caregivers who may be in need of support.

You are not in this alone. We are here as a resource to you, your team, and your community.

Please contact us for more information, let us know how we can best support you.

