

Death by Overdose: Working with Survivors

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Common Themes

Characteristics that make grief
complicated.

Societal Response~

- ▶ "...the powerful and intense stigma against drug use and mental illness, shared among the public-at-large imposes challenges in healing in immense proportion..."(1)
- ▶ Avoidance- Isolation- judgment- blame
 - ▶ System: Police, EMT, Medical Examiner
 - ▶ People in one's community, society at large
- ▶ Cyclical feature- awkwardness and fear of judgment perpetuates isolation and lack of support seeking.

Grieving is Profound-

- ▶ 'Traditional' grieving with overarching challenges that compound the grief:
 - ▶ Isolation
 - ▶ Unique Emotional Responses
 - ▶ Family Grieving
- ▶ 'Hope' is gone.

Death was Preventable-

- ▶ Why-What happened?
- ▶ Guilt and Shame
- ▶ Responsibility and Blame
- ▶ Reinforced by Societal Response

What happened? ~ Making sense of the overdose.

- ▶ History of drug use known or unknown (2):
 - ▶ 'Anticipated' vs sudden death
- ▶ Police reports:
 - ▶ Often not comprehensive
- ▶ Autopsy reports:
 - ▶ Can take a long time
 - ▶ Often not fully conclusive or not consistent with families belief/lived experiences
- ▶ Report by friends/ acquaintances:
 - ▶ Missing pieces
- ▶ Understanding of addiction:
 - ▶ Cause, control, cure

Guilt ~

- ▶ A feeling or sense of responsibility:
 - ▶ What did I do? - What did I not do?
 - ▶ Am I bad mother, bad partner, etc.?
- ▶ Connection between survivor's personal drug/alcohol use and the death of their loved one.
- ▶ Would have, could have, should have...
- ▶ Ambivalence:
 - ▶ "I was powerless over his disease and powerless to stop his death".
 - ▶ "I could have been prevented- I hate knowing that."

Shame~

- ▶ Judgment and isolation.
- ▶ Many do not reveal the cause of death.
 - ▶ Many will lie even in the face of facts.
 - ▶ Fear judgment
 - ▶ Fear their loved one will not be honored.

Responsibility ~ Blame

- ▶ Was it accidental or purposeful?
- ▶ Who is responsible? Self inflicted, "murder?"
- ▶ Did the deceased choose the drug under free will?
- ▶ Did family/friends:
 - ▶ Use with the deceased?
 - ▶ Introduce them to alcohol/drugs?
 - ▶ Enable the use?
 - ▶ Set boundaries that "pushed them further into the drug culture"?

"What did we do?" ~"What could we have done?"

Relief~

- ▶ Long struggle with drug use.
 - ▶ The pain and suffering for their loved one is now over.
 - ▶ Roller coaster ride is finally over.
 - ▶ Peace within household, no more worrying.
- ▶ May have guilt over having relief.

Anger~

- ▶ Anger at stigma/image:
 - ▶ Embarrassed at image/judgment people have of deceased.
 - ▶ Embarrassed that addiction is apart of their family.
- ▶ Anger at the person/addiction that killed your loved one.
 - ▶ Can include the deceased.
- ▶ Anger at self for not preventing or protecting.
- ▶ Anger at God.
- ▶ Anger at circumstances of death:
 - ▶ He knew his sister would find him. How dare he do that to her. She did not deserve this.

Rejection~

- ▶ Rejection and abandonment:
 - ▶ My loved chose drugs- what I could provide for them - my love was not good enough. What I have and who I am is not good enough - their drug use was their priority.
- ▶ Rejection and anger can go hand-in-hand:
 - ▶ I gave them a good life why would they ...
- ▶ Rejection can impact their view of them self/self esteem:
 - ▶ I'm a bad parent..if I can't keep my kids alive than I have no business parenting.
- ▶ Rejection ties directly with a misconception around "intent" to die by overdose.
- ▶ Rejection ties with understanding of addiction and level of 'control over the use'.

Trauma-

- ▶ Trauma -
 - ▶ More difficult if found the person, but still occurs even in the absence of seeing body.
 - ▶ Power of the imagination.
 - ▶ May manifest PTSD symptoms.

Family Grief

- ▶ Secrets
 - ▶ Incongruence in what they want the world to know - both within the family and outside of the family.
- ▶ Family functioning
 - ▶ Expressions of anger, blame, 'protecting fragile members'.
- ▶ Blame
 - ▶ Role of each family member played/didn't play.
- ▶ Incongruence in Coping and Grieving styles within family.
- ▶ Hypervigilance to others in the family
 - ▶ Fear other's use, relapse, mental health stress, etc.

Recovery Tasks & "c"linical work

Professional Support

- ▶ Your role in the grieving process-
 - ▶ Companioning verses treating
 - ▶ Duration is a forever thing
 - ▶ Learn to integrate and carry the loss with them.
 - Rock: Metaphor by J. Jordan
- ▶ Assess:
 - ▶ Coping
 - ▶ Trauma
 - ▶ Suicidal Intent, Relapse
 - ▶ Family Coping

Supporting the Bereaved

- ▶ Normalize and educate on possible grief responses.
- ▶ Attend to unique challenges.
- ▶ Trauma- Need to assess for trauma early & again a few months into grieving.
 - ▶ Coping with the trauma can trump the grieving process.
 - ▶ May need trauma-focused support.
- ▶ Identify & Teach Coping Skills-
 - ▶ Regulating the pain. Need to be kind to self.
 - ▶ "I only grieve from 7:00-8:00 every morning and every night. He was not my 24 hours when alive, he can't be in his death".

Tasks in Grieving

- ▶ Need to move through traditional grieving....

AND

- ▶ Make sense of what does not make sense.
 - ▶ Could it have been predicted?
 - ▶ Help facilitate "getting answers"- truths are important.
 - ▶ May need to talk with friends, coworkers, etc.
 - ▶ I had to ask all his friends about him in his final months.
 - ▶ Honest look at personal role and the impact of other factors.
 - ▶ Resources from Al anon, Nar anon, etc.

Tasks Continued

- Address family and social issues- "guilty victims".
- ▶ Skills in managing others questions, etc. Both it is ok to talk about - or not, it does not make sense to me so I can't really talk about it now.
 - ▶ May need to stay away from hurtful people.
- Help make connection with other survivors - support groups.
- Plan ahead for special dates: holidays, birthdates, etc.

Tasks Continued

- ▶ Repair the relationship with the deceased.
 - ▶ Re-establish a positive relationship.
- ▶ Honoring the life, not the death. The story of the person's life is not the "last paragraph".
 - ▶ Support the acknowledgement of a life narrative.
- ▶ Reinvest in living- "Make my grief work for good."

Citations/References:

1) Page 291; Feigelman, W., Jordan, J. & Gorman, B. (2011).

2) da Silva, E., Noto, A. Formigoni, M. (2011).

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