

Supporting families after an overdose-related death



the Grief-Sensitive
Healthcare Project

griefsensitivehealthcare.org

When a patient dies by overdose or reasons related to substance misuse, we may struggle to know what to say or do when interacting with families.

Despite the tragic prevalence of overdose-related deaths, families often lack the support they deserve due to the stigma associated with substance use and addiction, and therefore may grieve in isolation. As hard as it can feel, there are no 'right words' that will take away a family's pain following a death caused by overdose; so rather than providing a script, here we provide some guidance to keep in mind and sample phrases that will guide you in communicating sensitively with grieving families. Your empathetic presence can be unknowingly impactful.

Remain curious

- *How are you feeling?*
- *What's on your mind?*
- *Can you tell me more about that?*
- *I want to ask what I can do that you would find helpful.*
- *How are you making sense of what happened?*
- *How is your child making sense of this?*

Hold a not-knowing stance

- *I imagine...*
- *I don't know for certain...*
- *Is it possible that maybe...*
- *I wonder if you might feel/think/wish/want...*
- *Avoid phrases like: "you must be feeling...", "I know how hard this is...", or "I know you're sad."*

Be transparent

- *I have been thinking of you.*
- *You've been on my mind.*
- *Your family has been on my mind.*
- *I've been thinking about...*
- *I'm so glad you've shared that.*
- *I am so sorry you're carrying this pain*
- *I find myself wishing...*

Collaborate

- *I want to make sure I'm using language that feels okay to you.*
- *Let's think together about how you'd like to remember [patient's name].*
- *I want to spend some time thinking with you about what the next steps should be.*
- *Give choice whenever possible: "would you like to sit or stand?"*

Recognize the 'whole' person & honor relationships

Be mindful of how you talk about the person who died. It will be important to honor the complexity and uniqueness of the individual, separating their cause of death from who they were and how they will be remembered.

- *How would you like me to refer to [person's name]?*
- *I imagine there were lots of things that made [person's name] unique and special. What are some of the things you will remember?*