



**Scottish
Families**

Affected by Alcohol & Drugs

Sudden and Unexplained Deaths

This booklet is for anyone who has experienced the sudden or unexplained death of a loved one, and/or is bereaved through drugs or alcohol.

Family members who have lost a loved one from a substance-related death and suicide have written this booklet with the support of Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs (Scottish Families).

We are sorry to hear about your loss. We hope that you can find something from this booklet that allows you to cope better with the loss of your loved one.

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What is bereavement?

Bereavement (sometimes referred to as grief), is a term used to describe the sense of loss felt when a loved one passes away. This sense of loss can have a range of emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, frustration and anxiety.

Just because you have lost someone you love does not mean that you should forget about them or change how you feel about them.

People who are bereaved through drugs or alcohol may have to deal with:

- Stigma around substance use and the media
- A belief that the death was premature and avoidable
- Feelings of guilt
- A challenging relationship with the person prior to the death
- Police and court involvement
- A loss of hope that the person would stop using substances

People will respond differently to bereavement and there is no 'right way' to grieve. When you lose a loved one who has used drugs in their life, whether they died because of a substance-related death or other means, you may experience disenfranchised grief.

What is disenfranchised grief?

If someone is disenfranchised then they are deprived the right to something. In this sense, bereavements from alcohol or drugs can feel more complicated than most due to the nature of the cause of death. If the death was drug-related, it

can be more challenging for families because of the stigma around substance use.

Due to the behaviours of the person who died, friends and family are often met with stigmatising responses rather than sympathy and support. This can leave families feeling that their grief is unacknowledged and feel shame in talking about their loved one. This can make the grieving process more complicated.

Families may feel they cannot talk about the death, which in turn means they cannot find support which may lead to isolation.

“I felt as though I had to hide the feelings of hurt and utter grief and despair that was tearing me apart as it made others around me uncomfortable. I felt if I told people about how my son died they looked at me thinking – what else did you expect? I have a lot of friends and family but felt like no one understood me and that’s a very lonely place to be.” – Family Member

How does grief affect families?

Grief affects everybody differently and it can have an impact on your whole body.

It creates different emotions such as sadness, anxiety, shock, guilt and anger. It affects you physically and can lead to low energy, loss of appetite, poor sleeping patterns, general fatigue and motivation, and struggling to do everyday things. It affects your day-to-day behaviour making you forgetful, having a great desire to visit places with memories to feel closer to your loved one, social withdrawal/isolation by not wanting to talk about the loss of your loved one, and denying facts of the death as they are too difficult to deal with. You may have thoughts of disbelief that your family

is in this situation and confusion about how this could have happened. Having this on your mind constantly can give you a feeling of being preoccupied leading to loss of concentration.

Grief can cause strain on family relationships because people experience grief differently. A family member may find it more difficult to cope and other family members may not be able to understand as they are not experiencing it.

Grief can have a number of effects on relationships within the wider family. Families may grow closer as they need each other for support or would like to spend more time together. Some family members may also grow apart if the grieving individuals retreat into themselves or if any family member loses patience with grief, or a combination. Some family relationships may not experience any changes. Every family is different.

How does grief affect children?

Children who experience the sudden and unexpected loss of a loved one often grieve in a different way to adults. Some children often do not have the language to share their feelings and emotions.

Signs of children experiencing grief could be changes in eating patterns, not wanting to eat and disturbed sleeping patterns (which can include bed-wetting in young children.) Children can become shy and introverted or bossy and confrontational. They may refuse or have difficulty in engaging in day-to-day activities such as attending school or socialising with others. These could be signs of a child struggling to cope with the loss of a loved one however when asked why they are behaving in this manner, children may not understand why they are doing it. Adults in the family

should look for changes in children's behaviour and consider what they are trying to communicate.

Secondary Loss

In addition to the grief experienced by the death of a loved one, you may also experience what is referred to as 'secondary losses'.

Families may have found that they have been coping with the frustration, stress and pain of the person's substance use for a long time. They may feel that they 'lost' the person they knew many years before.

Families often say they felt the death was inevitable as there may have been overdose situations before the actual death or the person was not getting appropriate help or engaging with the support they needed.

Whether you are grieving before or after your loved one's death, it all results in the same emotions. You need to grieve for any secondary losses you may have had and cope with the difficulties experienced from those losses.

“After years of heroin use my son became very different from the quiet shy little boy I brought up. I used to long for his cuddles and the love that he used to have for me. He changed so much through his drug use but I still loved him. He was my boy, he struggled with life and it destroyed me when he died. It's been 5 years since I lost him and with the help I received from the recovery community I am adjusting to life without him, he was such a big part of my everyday it's difficult to fill the time. My volunteering really helps me. If I'm helping someone else I know I'm doing well.”

- Family Member

Finding out about the death

Whatever the situation, a family finding out their loved one has died will always come as a shock.

If you did not know that your loved one used drugs and/or alcohol, you may experience feelings of disbelief and 'this can't be true'.

The circumstances surrounding the death may be unclear and if drugs are suspected, it changes what families have to face as police will have to be involved.

Some families may experience emotional and psychological trauma at the situation, depending on what has happened.

What is emotional and psychological trauma?

Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of very stressful event(s) that can make you feel frightened, helpless, overwhelmed and may lead to isolation. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatised. Families often say that the recurring feeling of being helpless to make their loved one's drug and/or alcohol use go away leads to increasing stress levels and helplessness. Families say they feel overwhelmed with thoughts that they should have done something more to help.

How does trauma affect you?

When we are in shock or frightened, our natural body's survival response triggers to protect us. This is the body's automatic response that you cannot control. This is often called the 'flight or fight' response but in cases of emotional or psychological trauma, this response is actually 'flight, fight or freeze'.

Your brain decides you can't run away from the situation, you can't fight your way out of it, therefore it is best just to freeze. This slows down time and allows you time to figure out what you should do next.

This is a useful survival response but the problem is that sometimes when the 'freeze' response has been switched on it can take a while to switch back off. This can result in intrusive thoughts about what happened to your loved one, flashbacks and emotional numbness, feeling on edge, difficulty sleeping and feeling anxious.

Not everybody will experience a traumatic response to the death of their loved one. If you feel that you are not coping and experiencing unpleasant episodes, you should consider seeking support.

If your feelings are overwhelming, you can always speak with your GP. Support from friends, family, the wider community and support services can help you work through your feelings and trauma.

“When my daughter died I felt that my world had come to an end and there was no point in going on even though I have 2 other children. I felt I was sinking and being suffocated. I went to my doctor who offered me medication on a short term basis but suggested I attend a bereavement café where I could go and meet other people who had lost a loved one. It took weeks to build the confidence to go. When I got there I initially felt embarrassed about my daughter’s overdose as other parents had lost children to cancer and suicide but they didn’t see me as any different. They saw me as a mum broken hearted at the loss of her only daughter. That acceptance and understanding is what made me turn the corner. Life is looking good. I miss her every day but I am thankful for the years we had together. Getting support is what changed my life. I don’t believe I would be here today if I hadn’t.”

– Family Member

What happens after the death?

During the first week after the death of your loved one, there is a lot to take in. There are official procedures that have to take place and these can take a few days, sometimes weeks. The circumstances surrounding the death may be unclear and if drugs are suspected, the first thing that will take place is police involvement and an investigation.

Investigation

Police have to attend all unexplained deaths where drugs may be involved. Until they investigate and understand what has actually happened the death is treated as suspicious. There will be investigations carried out to identify the circumstances of the death and preserve any possible evidence. This is the reason why they may have to treat the place where your loved one died as a potential crime scene. This may mean that you will not get access to these premises during this time. This can be very upsetting and hugely inconvenient but it is essential to the investigation and it's also important to remember that the police are only trying to understand what has happened to your loved one and find out if a crime has taken place.

Until the police are satisfied they know all the facts about the death, they need to preserve the location where your loved one died to make sure no potential evidence is lost. They will take photographs of the area and to allow this to take place no one will be permitted access to the area.

Officers will remove items that they feel might hold potential evidence or information from the location. This

may include mobile phones, laptops, clothing etc. and any drug-related items and drugs found at the scene. This can include property that may belong to other family members or friends if your loved one passed away in their home. This allows police to have items examined by specialist staff if required. For all sudden and unexplained deaths, police are required to send a report regarding the death to the Procurator Fiscal (PF).

Role of the Procurator Fiscal (PF)

The PF has a duty to investigate all sudden, suspicious, accidental and unexplained deaths, and any death occurring in circumstances which give rise to public concern. This is completely different from their role in the investigation and prosecution of crime. In most cases, a death certificate cannot be issued until the cause of death has been established. The funeral cannot take place until a death certificate has been issued. In any death where there is a possibility of drugs being a factor, it is likely that the PF will instruct a post mortem to be undertaken to identify the exact cause of death.

Post Mortem

You will be informed when the post mortem (sometimes called an autopsy) will take place. Every effort will be taken to carry out an autopsy as soon as possible, however the timescale for this can vary around the country and local officers may be able to provide an approximate indication of when this will take place.

It may be necessary for family or friends to formally identify

their loved one prior to this taking place. The identification process may take place via a TV monitor or through a glass window. You will not be allowed to touch your loved one's body at this time. This is due to ongoing investigations into the death and the need to preserve any potential evidence. It may be possible after the post mortem for you to be allowed private time with your loved one without the need for a glass window. This is very much dependent on circumstances and can be discussed with the mortuary staff. Police will update you with the result of the post mortem as soon as they can.

“Waiting for the post mortem and all the bits that goes with that seems like years. Time seems to stand still. I was angry with everybody at the time and thought the Police were just getting in the way of me getting my boy back. Looking back now I can understand why things are done the way they are. If it wasn't for the thorough investigation by the Police we would have assumed my son was another unfortunate overdose but it turns out it was somebody else's fault. They were responsible for injecting the drugs into him which led to his death. This gave us closure but my heart also breaks for the family of the boy responsible, he is struggling himself and his family have lost him to a prison sentence. I don't believe he meant to harm my boy I think he just thought he was helping him out. It's a tragedy for all involved.”

– Family Member

Cause of death

If the post mortem identifies the final cause of death, a certificate can be issued. If it is inconclusive or requires the results of the forensic samples then a provisional death certificate will be issued.

The funeral cannot take place until the PF has agreed your loved one's body can be released following any investigation. During this time CID officers will be your main contact and will keep you updated on timescales.

Registration of death and funeral arrangements

Families can sometimes feel that waiting for their loved one's body to be released can be a lengthy process and that time is standing still. The police and the PF are doing everything they can to progress the release of your loved one's body and this unfortunately takes time. Even though you are waiting for your loved one to be returned there are some things that family or friends need to do.

Any death which occurs in Scotland must be registered within eight days of the date of death and can be registered in any registration district in Scotland. Information on the registration process can be found on the National Records for Scotland website - <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/registration/registering-a-death>

You do not have to wait for your loved one to be returned to you to contact a funeral director. You can contact any funeral director of your choice and discuss provisional plans for the funeral.

If you are worried about paying for a funeral, you might be able to get advice from Down to Earth. They provide advice and support for people on low incomes struggling with funeral costs.

Telling people what happened

Telling your family and friends that your loved one has died is very upsetting for all. Your wider family and friends may not have known your loved one used drugs and/or alcohol. This information in itself can cause a shocked reaction. You may find it easier to tell one family member and ask them to let the rest of the family and your friends know.

A very common thread running through all aspects of this information booklet is the sense of stigmatisation and shame experienced by families who have lost a loved one from drugs and/or alcohol. This adds to the upset during a particularly difficult and stressful time. You have nothing to be ashamed of. For that very reason we would encourage you to only disclose to family and friends what you feel comfortable disclosing about your loved one.

“My wider family and friends knew my son used drugs and had a problem with them for years. When he died I felt I couldn’t cope with their judgement on his life. We shouldn’t be judged but it happens. I chose to tell my wider family and friends that he died from a heart attack in his sleep. It made my life a little easier at the time. I wasn’t looking for their pity I was just looking for acceptance that I had lost my son, my only child and how hurt I was feeling.” – Family Member

Media Enquiries

Sometimes suspected substance-related deaths are reported in the media. They can be reported in a judgemental, insensitive and degrading way. This can be very hurtful to families and friends when the person they love is being spoken about in such a manner. Your family are under no obligation to talk to the media about the circumstances in which you lost your loved one. Try not to read the media coverage as it will only upset you when the facts are not reported properly. Over time, the media will lose interest. However if you feel that the media are harassing you, you may want to consider legal advice.

Significant Clinical Incident Review (SCI)

When your loved one has died because of a substance-related death and they were receiving treatment from a clinical professional (not their GP) you may be invited by the NHS to a Significant Clinical Incident Review. The NHS appoint a team who were not involved in your loved one's care, it usually involves senior clinical staff such as a Consultant or Lead Nurse with support from clinical risk staff. They gather information to establish the events and from this decide if appropriate care was delivered and explore any areas where it was unclear.

The NHS welcome families involvement in this process. Families hold a lot of information regarding what happened to their loved one or other background information that may be relevant to the investigation. It also gives families an opportunity to ask questions that you want included in the

investigation. If the questions you have raised are not relevant to the investigation then you may be advised on how best to go forward. This is a good way for families to be heard and to get closure by perhaps getting your questions answered.

Self care following bereavement

People will respond differently to bereavement and there is no 'right way' to grieve. It is important that we experience whichever emotions we have as this is a natural part of the grieving process. It can bring with it exhaustion, lack of sleep, loss of appetite and physical aches and pains. It is important that you focus on self-care during this time, eating healthily, taking light exercise and spending time with people you feel comfortable with.

To help you with that we have included some tips on self care.

Self care tip one: **get moving**

As well as burning off adrenaline and releasing endorphins, exercise and movement can actually help your nervous system regulate and improve your mood.

Try to exercise for 30 minutes or more on most days. If it is easier, three 10-minute spurts of exercise per day are just as good.

Exercise that is rhythmic and engages both your arms and legs such as walking, running, swimming, or even dancing works best.

Instead of focusing on your thoughts or distracting yourself while you exercise, really focus on your body and how it feels as you move. Notice the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of wind on your skin.

Self care tip two: **talk to others**

Following the loss of a loved one, you may want to withdraw from others but isolation may make you feel worse. If you have a supportive friend or family member who you feel comfortable talking to, tell them how you are feeling and try to avoid spending too much time alone. Why not catch-up for coffee or go a walk together?

You can also join a support group for bereaved families. Being with others who are facing the same problems can help reduce your sense of isolation and hearing how others cope can help inspire you in your own recovery.

As well as helping others, volunteering can be a great way to challenge the sense of helplessness that often accompanies bereavement. Remind yourself of your strengths and reclaim your sense of power by helping others.

If you live alone or far from family and friends, you could take a class or join a club to meet new people with similar interests.

Self care tip three: **self-regulate your nervous system**

No matter how agitated, anxious or out of control you feel, it is important to know that you can calm yourself. Not only will it help relieve your anxiety but it will also give you a greater sense of control.

If you are feeling disoriented, confused or upset, a quick way to calm yourself is through mindful breathing. Simply take 60 breaths, and focus your attention on each out-breath.

There are other ways to calm our body down, maybe a sight,

smell, noise or taste makes us calmer like eating chocolate, listening to music, cuddling our pets, etc. Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you.

Simple grounding techniques are also known to make our bodies calmer. Sit on a chair with your back straight and feet firmly on the ground, take deep breaths in and out, look around you and pick out six objects that have red or blue in them (or any colours you want) and you'll notice your breathing starting to get deeper and calmer.

Self care tip four: **take care of your health**

Having a healthy body can increase your ability to cope with the stress of bereavement.

Feeling sad and being emotional can be tiring. Try to sleep when you can. If you are struggling to sleep there are few things you can try to make sleep easier: avoid caffeine, avoid anything too stimulating before bedtime like TV and social media. Try reading or mindfulness to relax the mind before you try to sleep.

Avoid things that 'numb the pain' – alcohol and drugs and other substances will make you feel worse when their effects wear off.

Eat healthily, a well-balanced diet can help with mood. If you want to have something unhealthy, allow yourself that, but try where possible to make healthier choices.

Try relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises to reduce stress. Schedule time for activities such as favourite hobbies, or even try to learn a new hobby.

When to seek professional help

Recovering from the loss of a loved one takes time, and everyone heals at their own pace. If you feel you are not coping it can really help to access support. Maybe you are struggling to sleep or your intense feelings are not going away. Maybe you are struggling to get back into a 'normal' routine or have symptoms of depression and anxiety. You can speak with your GP or contact a support service to find support that is suitable to your needs.

It is important that you are aware of other sources of support at this difficult time. Family members who have experienced what you are going through think it is important to reach out and access support because it helps you come to terms with the loss of your loved one.

Support Services

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs

Address: Edward House 199 Sauchiehall Street Glasgow G2 3EX

Freephone Helpline: 08080 10 10 11

Email: helpline@sfad.org.uk

Website: www.sfad.org.uk

Scottish Families has a free confidential helpline where you can speak with advisers and dedicated bereavement advisors. They will listen to you and tell you what support is available, including free sessions with a qualified, accredited bereavement counsellor. Support is available for family members over 16 years of age.

Cruse Bereavement Care

Helpline: 0844 477 9400

Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk

CRUSE offers support after the death of someone regardless of how they have died.

Wellbeing services

Breathing Space: 0800 83 85 87

Samaritans: 08457 90 90 90

Down to Earth

Telephone: 020 8983 5055

Email: downtoearth@qsa.org.uk

Down to Earth offers a unique service to individuals on low income to ensure that no one faces unnecessary debt or distress due to high funeral costs. Many people find it difficult to find an affordable send off for their loved ones. They can help you with planning an affordable funeral and/or dealing with debt after a funeral has taken place.

They offer a funeral advice line where their experienced advisors will support you to plan the funeral, reduce costs, identify ways to raise money, and get the right government support.

More info available on their website -

<https://www.quakersocialaction.org.uk/we-can-help/helping-funerals/down-earth>

My Notes

My Notes

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs
Main Office: Edward House, 199 Sauchiehall Street,
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Helpline: 08080 10 10 11
helpline@sfad.org.uk
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Registered Scottish Charity: SC034737



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