



# Supporting Children and Yourself After an Overdose Death

*In 2022, Philadelphia reported 78.9 deaths per 100,000 residents from unintentional drug overdoses, the highest figure among comparable cities and counties across the United States<sup>1</sup>. An estimated 1,300 Philadelphians died of unintentional drug overdose in 2023, the second-highest total on record, after the 1,413 deaths reported in 2022<sup>2</sup>. Below are some tips to help you and your children cope after the death of someone you love due to drug addiction.*

## **Don't blame yourself.**

Those who have experienced the death of a loved one due to addiction often feel they could have done something to prevent the death. Children can struggle with self-blame, and may not know how to process those difficult feelings. It is important to understand that addiction is a powerful, often hidden disease which causes those afflicted to do things they would not typically do. No matter how much someone may want to stop using or what you do to help them stop, the addiction is too powerful and not in anyone's control.

## **Frequently reassure children that they are safe and cared for.**

It is important to keep routines while recognizing the importance of flexibility. Children need to know their basic needs will still be met, especially after a death. Children may also worry that other people they love will die. It is best to reassure in the present rather than offer false hope for the future.

## **Use and model healthy coping skills that have worked in the past.**

Think about how you dealt with big feelings in the past, such as exercising, spending time with people you know and trust, asking for help, and praying or meditating, and use those skills now. Help your child identify how they coped before in tough times and encourage them to use those same practices.

## **Acknowledge all your child's feelings.**

Let children know it is okay to feel sad, mad, or any other emotion. Allow questions and provide honest, age-appropriate answers. It is okay for you to admit you don't have all the answers. Recognize that it is okay and even helpful to continue to talk about the loved one who died. Finding ways to remember them and stay connected to them is a healthy part of grieving for adults and children alike.

## **Each child will respond to grief differently and at different times**

There is no timeline for your child's grief. Remind your child that you will be there for them when they need you, and be open to their feelings whenever they're ready to share. Likewise, remember to validate your own feelings and realize that grief is a journey and a lifelong process. We do not "get over" our grief, but rather find ways to live with it and to move forward.

## **Recognize that children deal with death differently than adults.**

Children may need special help to process the death of a loved one, especially if they are not aware that their person had a drug problem. Use direct, age-appropriate language to explain what happened. Children may not talk about their feelings and may seem as if they are not grieving, but that is because they express feelings in different ways than adults. Remember, children are not small adults.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC WONDER Database, "Multiple Cause of Death Data," 2022, <https://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd.html>

<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia Department of Public Health, 2023.

## Allow your child to attend a grief group made up of their peers.

Grief support groups for children can help to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. A group specifically for children who have lost someone to drug addiction can also help them to feel less guilty or ashamed, and encourages them to share their feelings in a safe space.

## Look for support groups specifically for addiction-related deaths.

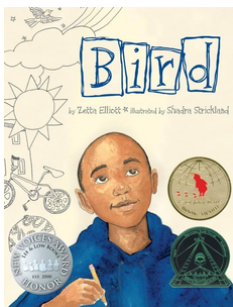
Uplift offers in-school grief support groups for overdose loss, as well as evening groups for families. Online support groups are available for those who may not feel comfortable expressing their grief in person. It may also be helpful to work with a trauma-informed therapist.

## Sign Up for Uplift's Services

Uplift's **Philly HopeLine** is a free, confidential helpline staffed by our Master's level clinicians. The Philly HopeLine is open to all youth and caregiver in the Philadelphia region. Call if you'd like to sign up for grief groups, receive emotional or grief support, identify community resources, or get on the list for an in-school grief group. Interpretation service is available for more than 100 languages. Dial **833-PHL-HOPE (833-745-4673)** to speak to an Uplift clinician, or email **PHLHope@UpliftPhilly.org**.

## Additional Resources for Caregivers and Youth

- The Division of Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction (SUPHR): [substanceusephilly.com](http://substanceusephilly.com)
- Access addiction treatment and complementary services: [dbhids.org/addiction-services](http://dbhids.org/addiction-services)
- Find harm reduction resources, including syringe exchanges: [ppponline.org](http://ppponline.org)
- Learn how to obtain and administer naloxone: [phillynaloxone.com](http://phillynaloxone.com)



### ***Bird***

*Written by Zetta Elliott, illustrated by Shadra Strickland*

This picture book for older readers tells the story of a family coping with addiction and overdose death. When his beloved older brother Marcus starts acting strange, Bird turns to his elders for advice and learns that “you can’t fix a broken soul.” Readers will be heartened by Bird’s quiet resilience, and moved by the healing power of putting pencil to paper.



### ***Someone I Love Died from a Drug Overdose***

*Written by Melody Ray, illustrated by R. Lynn O.*

In this vibrantly illustrated book for younger readers, Tommy’s father dies from substance use disorder. In clear, age-appropriate language, his mother explains that Tommy’s dad was sick and died in the hospital, and died of a disease called addiction. This story also includes a workbook, definitions, some facts and a note to the adult reading the story.

*A tip sheet from*

## **Uplift Center for Grieving Children**

Office: 267-437-3123

Philly HopeLine: 833-745-4673

**[www.UpliftPhilly.org](http://www.UpliftPhilly.org)**

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