



**Living with drug  
or alcohol-related  
bereavement**

## SUMMARY

Welcome. If you've recently lost a family member or friend to drugs or alcohol, this guide is here to offer support as you navigate the challenges ahead. It serves as a reminder that you are not alone, providing guidance on how to seek help from those around you and from professional organisations.



Grieving is a deeply [personal journey](#), and everyone experiences it differently. This guide focuses on finding a way to live with both the difficult and cherished memories of your loved one. Grief is a natural response to loss, including the death of a loved one and everyone experiences it in their own [unique way](#).

The person who has passed away likely had other family members and friends, some of whom you may not know, [who are also grieving](#). Managing your grief is an essential part of the healing process, and there are various [steps](#) you can take to support yourself through this journey.

This guide provides [practical advice](#) on handling some of the more immediate and logistical aspects of loss.

In addition to practical tips, this guide also shares the [stories](#) of others who have faced similar losses. You will find narratives from people who have lost a husband, a daughter, or a brother, offering insight into their journeys of grief and recovery. For additional resources and details on various organisations please refer to [Where can I go for more help?](#)

## KEY TERMS

### **Anxiety**

a feeling of fear or unease

### **Addictive**

when something can be difficult to stop

### **Confidentiality**

something being kept private or secret

### **Dependence**

a situation where you feel like you need something or someone all the time

### **Depression**

a low mood that can last a long time or keep returning, affecting your everyday life

### **Grief**

the experience of coping with loss

### **Will**

a legal document that allows you to specify how your assets and possessions should be distributed after you die

### **Isolation**

being alone or separated from others

# Introduction to Drugs

Losing someone you love is **emotionally devastating** and losing them to drugs or alcohol can add a sense of **immense isolation**.

Often, those around the bereaved feel unable or ill-equipped to offer **advice, comfort, or support**.

If you have recently lost a family member or friend to drugs or alcohol, this guide aims to help you and those around you **cope with the challenges** you may face.

Whether your loss was **sudden or expected**, we hope to support you through the first few days, weeks, or months of bereavement and on your journey towards **understanding and acceptance**.

## WHAT ARE DRUGS?

The term 'drugs' can be alarming and confusing. Drugs are chemicals or substances that **change the way our bodies work**.

It's important to know **you are not alone** – many others are also dealing with the tragic repercussions of drug use.

In England and Wales in the year ending March 2023, it was estimated that around:

**1 in 10 people aged 16 to 59 years**  
(~3.1 million) reported using an  
**illegal drug in the last 12 months**



Source: [ONS, 2023](#)

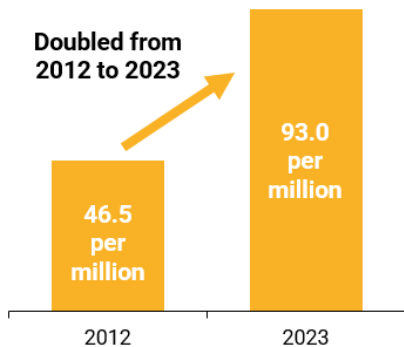
Refer to the [resources section](#) for more information on the different types of drugs.

## DRUG POISONING

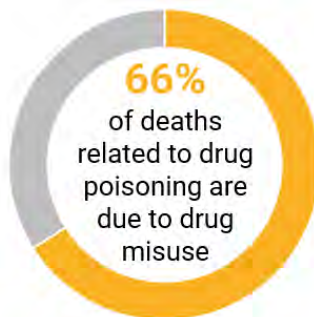
**The rate of drug-poisoning deaths continues to increase.**

There were **5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning** registered in England and Wales in 2023; the **highest number** since records began in 1993.

Source: [ONS, 2023](#)



**Rate of deaths related to drug-poisoning in England and Wales**



**Reported in England and Wales, 2023**



# What you might be going though

Bereavement can be especially tough when a loved one is lost to drug or alcohol use, with **stigma** often adding to the isolation.

While **grieving is a personal journey** and **everyone experiences it differently**, the focus is on finding a way to live with both the difficult and cherished memories.

**Healing is challenging**, but it is possible to emerge with **greater strength and understanding**.

## WHEN A DEATH OCCURS

### **It's natural to feel mentally, physically, and emotionally overwhelmed.**

If you've recently lost a loved one to drugs or alcohol, you might feel numb or in disbelief, especially if the death was sudden. Dealing with doctors, coroners, social services, or the police can be stressful but may provide some answers.

### **These feelings will usually lessen over time.**

Bereavement can cause anxiety, which is normal but can be severe or prolonged. Consult your GP if needed. You might withdraw from friends and family, lose your appetite, experience digestive issues, and find it hard to concentrate.



Feeling isolated and lonely is natural, but remember, support is available. Whether you need emotional support, practical assistance, or advice, help is available. See [“Where can I go for help?”](#)



## THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF YOUR BEREAVEMENT

### Sudden Death

Your loved one's death may have been sudden due to an accidental overdose, contaminated drugs, or associated violence. Emotions such as shock, anger, disbelief, and self-blame are common.

### Drug-related suicide

Coping with a drug-related suicide involves complex emotions like guilt, shame, betrayal, and endless questions. Seeking support is crucial.

### Loss of a child

If your loved one lost a child or suffered a miscarriage due to their substance use, they might be deeply traumatised. Your feelings can be complex, possibly including blame and anger. Seeking counselling early can help manage these emotions (see ['Where can I go for help?'](#)).

### Long-term illnesses

Bereavement from a long-term illness caused by substance use can mean witnessing a slow deterioration. Grief may have started long before the actual death, involving feelings of loss of hope and connection. Thoughts of guilt and responsibility are common but can change over time. Counselling may help in finding clarity and understanding.

# The grieving process

Grief is a natural response to loss, including death. It involves emotions, beliefs, and thoughts. People might be surprised by the depth of their grief, expecting it to follow a set pattern, but it can be chaotic.

There are four generally accepted phases of grief, though individuals experience them differently, sometimes in a fluctuating manner.

## THE PHASES OF GRIEF

### Shock and denial

Initially, you may struggle to accept the reality of the death, feel numb, or shock, especially if the death was sudden. Concentrating on tasks like registering the death or planning the funeral might be difficult, though some find that these tasks help them acknowledge the reality.



### Experiencing pain

Grief can cause mental and physical symptoms such as distraction, tearfulness, guilt, anger, sadness, exhaustion, appetite loss, and isolation. These intense feelings often subside over time, but seeking counselling can help if coping is difficult.



### Adjusting to reality

As you come to terms with your loss you will find ways to remember your loved one meaningfully. Frustration may arise if others seem to move on faster than you, and you might fear losing their support. This phase is a step forward towards adjusting to your new reality.



### Investing in the future

Over time, emotions become less intense, and feelings of guilt and blame diminish. You will start to re-engage with life, socialise more, and make future plans while carrying positive memories of your loved one.



## RELATIONSHIPS DURING GRIEF

Losing someone to drug use is traumatic, and it can **strain relationships**.

Anger towards yourself, others, or the deceased is common.

Differing attitudes toward the deceased's drug use can create **family divisions**.

These tensions are **natural and tend to resolve over time** as everyone finds their way forward.



## DEALING WITH SUICIDE OR SUDDEN DEATH

Drug or alcohol-related suicide or sudden death is particularly hard to accept, often leading to a search for meaning and understanding.

Common symptoms include **anxiety, panic attacks, and flashbacks**.

**Guilt, anger, sadness, and self-imposed shame** can isolate you further.

It's crucial to talk to family, friends, or counsellors about the death and any suicide note left behind.

Admitting feelings of relief following a suicide, especially after chronic depression or terminal illness, is normal.

**Balancing devastation with relief is part of bereavement.**

It's important to accept your feelings and avoid letting guilt and blame dominate your life.

# What others might be going through

The person who has passed away likely had other family and friends, some of whom you might not know, who are also grieving.

They will be navigating their own paths through their grief, which may result in behaviours you don't understand.

If possible, try to empathise with them. It can be comforting to know that others are mourning your loved one as well, and sharing your feelings and memories with them can be helpful.

## EFFECT ON OTHERS

### Siblings

Siblings may experience a wide range of emotions, including **anger, judgement, resentment, guilt, and self-blame.**

They may also blame themselves or feel guilty about things said or unsaid, especially if relationships were strained.

They need space and your support to process their grief.

### Children and Adolescents

Children grieve differently from adults and **may struggle to express their feelings.**

Young children might not fully understand death's permanence and may have fears about their safety.

Adolescents may become **withdrawn or engage in risky behaviours.**

They need reassurance that it's okay to be upset and to enjoy life again.

## GIVING SUPPORT TO YOUNGER CHILDREN

Adults should be open and honest with children about the death, avoiding assumptions about their feelings.

**Comfort and reassure them** and consider whether they want to see the body or attend the funeral. Watch for prolonged grief symptoms, such as bed-wetting or nightmares, and **seek professional help if necessary**.

## SUPPORTING PARTNERS AND FRIENDS

Family relationships can be strained after a death, with **high tensions and conflicting feelings**. **Relationships with partners may also be affected**, as each person deals with their grief differently.



Friends may also struggle to know how to support you. Let them know if you want to talk or need help with practical matters. Bereavement can **temporarily set you apart** from friends and neighbours. For those trying to help you cope it is also a difficult time.

Some people **will not know how to comfort you, or even acknowledge what has happened**, because of taboos surrounding death and drugs or alcohol.

They may not want to offend or say the wrong thing, but you may interpret this as rejection, or see it as a judgment on yourself or the person you have lost. Encouraging **open communication** can help ease these tensions.

**Keep communication channels open** and support each other through shared memories and understanding.

# Moving though your journey

## MANAGING YOUR GRIEF

The initial days and weeks after a loved one's death are **extremely difficult**.

Expressing your feelings, either privately or with a trusted person, can help.

## GIVING YOURSELF TIME

Allow yourself **time and space** to grieve. Rushing to 'get on with life' can bury true feelings.

Consider creating a **memory book or a memorial**.

Balance grieving with everyday life and engage in spiritual practices if helpful.

## ALLOWING YOURSELF TO TALK

When feelings are confused or contradictory, **talking can help you acknowledge and accept your loss**. While support from friends and family may suffice, some may benefit from **counselling**. Various organisations can **connect you with experienced counsellors**.

Alternatively, joining a drug- or alcohol-related support group can be helpful ([see where I can go for help](#)).

## ACCEPTING OFFERS OF HELP

Try to **accept suitable offers of support** – not just practical help in the early stages. Having supportive people around you can **help with the loneliness** and isolation that often arise in your new daily reality. Determine your social limits and communicate your needs, e.g. a need for regular dinner invitations.

## LOOKING AFTER YOUR HEALTH

Loss, and the grief that follows it can also affect you **physically**. Accept practical and emotional support from others.

Make sure you keep in contact with other people as social support can help keep your immune system healthy. If you have any **health concerns**, make sure you **talk to your doctor** about them.

## KEEPING GOOD MEMORIES ALIVE

Many people find it important to **keep their loved one's memory alive**. Anniversaries and birthdays can be opportunities to honour their life and your relationship.

You might **visit a place significant to both of you**, like a family vacation spot, to reminisce. Creating a **memory box with treasured mementos** can also help.

## ENTERING THE WORLD AGAIN

Gradually you will find that you are **dwelling less on the past** and more on what the future looks like. Feeling **guilty** about **enjoying life** again is common after bereavement.

If this feeling persists, consider talking to a **counsellor**. Remember, planning activities without your loved one **doesn't mean they're forgotten**.

If life seems hopeless **now**, it will **slowly** start to feel worth living again. This difficult journey can make you feel **stronger**. Moving on doesn't mean forgetting your loved one; **their loss is now part of who you are**, but you **can see a future without them**.

## OFFERING SUPPORT AND ADVICE

Getting involved in campaigns about drug/alcohol abuse or **offering support to others** can help **channel unresolved feelings**.

For support and advice opportunities see <https://adfam.org.uk/>.

# Practical issues

## IF THE DEATH OCCURS IN HOSPITAL

Hospital staff will contact the next of kin and keep the body in the mortuary until the personal representative or executor arranges for its removal.

The deceased's possessions will be collected by the nearest relative.

Most funeral directors have a chapel of rest.



## IF THE DEATH OCCURS ELSEWHERE

**Expected Death:** Contact the attending doctor for a Medical Certificate and Formal Notice. Register the death within five days. For deaths due to HIV/AIDS, special handling rules may apply, but HIV/AIDS does not need to be mentioned on the certificate. Hepatitis, however, must be disclosed.

**Unexpected Death:** Contact the police, ambulance, family doctor, deceased nearest relative, minister of religion, and the coroner. The coroner investigates deaths under certain conditions, including violence, unnatural causes, or deaths in custody. A postmortem may be performed if needed.



Seek support from friends, family, or organisations to provide practical help and/or emotional support.

Religious and spiritual organisations can also provide guidance (see ['Where can I go for help?'](#)).



## ARRANGING THE FUNERAL

Seek recommendations for local funeral directors. **Funerals can be costly**; if financial help is needed, apply for a Social Fund Funeral Payment.

For more details, contact your **social security office**.

## DEALING WITH THE WILL

Locate the will and find the **executor**. The executor **manages the deceased's estate**, including settling debts and distributing assets.

Contact the **Probate and Inheritance Tax Helpline for guidance** on proving the will or applying for letters of administration.

## HANDLING POSSESSIONS

Sorting through the deceased's belongings can be distressing, especially if their living situation was unstable. Dispose of drugs **safely**.

For help with cleaning, contact your local **Environmental Health Department**.

# Where can I go for help?

## Further Adfam resources

Adfam offers information and advice for families affected by drugs and alcohol

Visit the resources page for further [Adfam resources](#)

## Useful Organisations

### Addiction Family Support

- Support for those affected or bereaved by a loved one's addiction
- Helpline: 0300 888 3853
- [www.addictionfamilysupport.org.uk](http://www.addictionfamilysupport.org.uk)

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

- Counselling and psychotherapy
- Helpline: 01455 883300
- [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

### Child Bereavement UK

- Support children and young people during bereavement
- Tel: 0800 02 888 40
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org>



## **CRUSE**

- Bereavement support, information and campaigning
- Tel 0808 808 1677
- <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

## **MIND**

- Mental health support
- Helpline: 0300 123 3393
- [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

## **Citizens Advice**

- Practical advice and knowledge
- Helpline: 0300 123 3393
- <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

## **Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SODS)**

- Peer-led support to adults impacted by suicide loss
- Helpline: 0300 111 5065
- <https://uksobs.com/>

## **FRANK**

- Advice and information for anyone concerned about drugs
- Helpline: 0300 123 6600
- [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

## **Good Grief Trust**

- Support and advice for anyone who has lost someone they love
- [www.thegoodgrieftrust.org](http://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org)

### **The Compassionate Friends**

- Peer support for bereaved parents, adult siblings, and grandparents.
- Helpline: 0345 123 2304
- <https://www.tcf.org.uk/>

### **Samaritans**

- Offers listening and support to people and communities in times of need
- Helpline: 116 123
- <https://www.samaritans.org/>

### **The Social Services Department of Your Local Council:**

- Details available from <https://www.gov.uk/>

### **Terrence Higgins Trust**

- A free online space for people living with HIV to connect
- Tel: 0808 802 1221
- <https://www.tht.org.uk/>

### **Winston's Wish**

- Advice and support for young people adults who are caring for young grieving people across the UK who are grieving the death of someone important
- Tel: 08452 03 04 05
- <https://winstonswish.org/>

## Further reading

- 'The Death of a Child' and 'Understanding Bereaved Children and Young People': The Child Bereavement Trust
- Winston's Wish: A range of publications and resources for supporting bereaved children ([www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk))
- 'Understanding Bereavement': Published by MIND ([www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk))
- 'Funerals without God': Published by the British Humanist Association ([www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk))
- 'What to do after a death in England and Wales': Available from the Department of Work and Pensions ([www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk))
- 'Bereaved by Addiction': Available from the DrugFam website ([www.drugfam.co.uk](http://www.drugfam.co.uk))

## Adfam Video Resources

Peter Cartwright, in collaboration with Adfam, has produced a series of [online support video sessions](#) for families affected by a loved one's substance use.

If you are the family member or friend of someone with a substance use problem, **these videos are for you.**

Each video is around **15 minutes in length**, and across the 14 sessions, Peter will take you through a range of different themes and topics, providing valuable information and guidance on how to cope with your loved one's substance use.

Peter, a trained counsellor, trainer and author, is part of the team at Adfam and has been supporting families affected by substance use since 1998.

We would like to thank both the Sidney Ivor Luck Counselling Trust and the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF)'s Coronavirus Emergency Fund for their generous support in enabling us to develop these videos.

Peter Cartwright has also published a [book](#) titled [Supporting People Bereaved through a Drug or Alcohol Related Death](#).

# Journeys

## Michelle's Journey (Bereavement of husband)



*"To be honest, I just thought we would be together forever"*

Michelle and her husband both regularly took amphetamines. But he started to take heroin too. Early one morning, Michelle came downstairs to find him dead in the front room. Michelle married Chris at 17.

Three years later, he introduced amphetamines to help her lose weight after her second pregnancy. She quickly became addicted, and soon started injecting multiple times a day like Chris.

One day, Chris came home intoxicated, and after a fight, Michelle went to bed without seeing him. When she woke up, she found Chris had overdosed and was dead.

She felt numb and spent two years using drugs to numb the pain, isolating herself and neglecting her children.

Eventually, Michelle checked into rehab, which helped her start grieving. Now sober and reunited with her children, Michelle is open with them about their father's death and her past drug use.

At 26, she is reconnecting with her family, completing a catering course, and aiming for university. She acknowledges that grief can strike unexpectedly, not just on anniversaries or birthdays.

## Annette's Journey (Bereavement of a daughter)

*"I miss her, I wish she was here"*



When her teenage daughter Lauren didn't come to see her as planned, Annette feared something terrible had happened. She found her alone in her flat, dead of a heroin overdose.

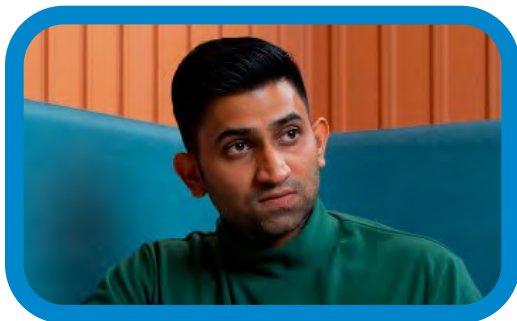
Annette was shocked to discover her daughter Lauren's diary entry revealing her heroin use. She confronted Lauren, who then entered a local drug clinic for counselling. During her treatment, Annette gave Lauren money to avoid theft and crime, and later agreed to let her move in with her boyfriend.

Despite initial success, Lauren relapsed, explaining she couldn't manage the cravings. Annette's last memory of Lauren was a lunch where Lauren expressed a desire to use drugs one last time. When Lauren didn't come home, Annette found her dead from a heroin overdose.

After the funeral, Annette spoke to the press and started a support group for parents facing similar tragedies. Although her two sons were distant for years, she now understands that grief made her self-focused and at times, angry.

She has learned that expressing feelings is crucial, and despite feeling suicidal at times, she strives to honour Lauren's memory by not being sad all the time.

## Will's Journey (Bereavement of a brother)



*“Don't know if he was bored or trying to numb the family pain”*

On Saturday night, James was set to DJ at a friend's party. By Tuesday, he was found dead, dressed and ready to go out, with his records beside him. The coroner ruled it as cocaine poisoning.

James and his brother Will had a troubled upbringing, with their parents' acrimonious split leading to them being sent to boarding school. Despite his scholarship to Oxford, James struggled with substance abuse, which escalated after their mother died of cancer in their twenties. James dabbled in drugs at parties but eventually started bingeing on crack and heroin. Despite multiple attempts at rehab, including group therapy and methadone treatment, James continued to struggle.

The weekend he died, he had told Will he planned to have a quiet weekend. Four days later, he was found dead in his flat from a crack cocaine overdose. His flatmate removed evidence, possibly to protect himself. Will reflects on the tragedy of James's death, regretting that none of his friends checked on him when he didn't show up at the party.

The memory of James lingers, and Will cherishes the good times they shared. Now, Will is focused on helping his own son grow up happy and balanced, hoping he will approach life, and any curiosity about drugs, with caution.

# About this resource:

The content in this booklet has been developed under advisement of specialist organisations and professionals.

This resource has been updated by **Nexus Values**, a specialist value strategy consultancy passionate about supporting the communication of value in healthcare, as part of a pro bono collaboration through **Passion Partnership**.



**We want anyone affected by someone else's drug or alcohol use to have the chance to benefit from healthy relationships, be part of a loving and supportive family and enjoy mental and physical wellbeing.**

**If you require further help and information please visit our website ([www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk))**