



Substance Abuse Death

Illicit drug use and abuse are difficult topics of conversation, particularly when they result in death. As with suicide, there is still much social stigma attached, which can result in deep emotional wounds for families and communities.

- The current understanding of drug addiction is that it is a biological disease called substance use disorder. It has social implications for the person who is addicted, such as withdrawal from usual activities, fixation on how to get the next high, and/or denial that anything is wrong or that everything is under control. For some people, addiction is manageable and treatable; others will die from it. With this view of addiction as a disease, it can become somewhat easier to discuss death by overdose.
- Communicate directly with your loved one about the facts of the disease and how it led to death: “Your cousin Mary had an addiction. Her addiction was a disease that made her sick, and she died this morning because of it.”
- Focus on facts without excessive detail and try to remain nonjudgmental in the discussion.
- Prepare yourself to answer questions about the addiction and why it made the person so sick that they died. If you don’t know something, it’s okay to acknowledge that. If the autistic person takes medication, you may need to clarify that most drugs are not addictive, nor do they cause harm or death if taken as prescribed. “Some drugs make a person healthier, but if a person takes too many at one time, they can become very sick and may die.”