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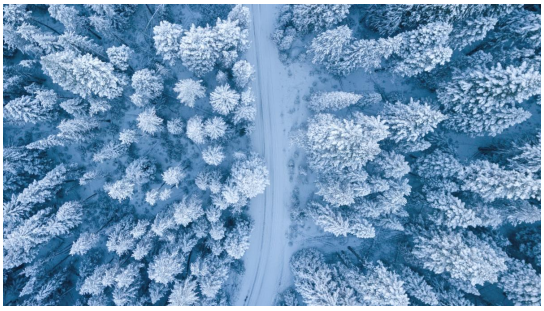
Acknowledging Grief During the Holidays



Greetings!

The Holidays can be a melancholy time for those of us who have lost people to substance use disorder.

In this newsletter, I will share how the opioid epidemic is affecting our community this holiday season.

Below I will also share some strategies for coping with grief during the holidays.

As December approaches, people feel pressured to be happy, grateful, and giving.

Our holiday spirit leads us to put on our happy faces, spend too much money, and focus on the needs of others.

There is at least one place at the table missing for the families of over a million overdose victims since 1999.
A loved one who was taken too soon should fill that empty spot.

There seems to be no sense in these losses, and we cannot comprehend the fateful questions they raise.

- What did we do wrong?
- How could this have happened?

We expect people to die of old age.

Even COVID makes more sense these days.

When a loved one is lost to an opioid overdose, it can feel like a crime was committed, but justice never comes. Instead of outrage at the crime, there is often blame.

There isn't an investigation beyond the immediate cause of death, and except in extreme circumstances, accountability is absent.
No one seems to care.

People say things like,

- He/she did it to themselves.
- It was only a matter of time.

Those statements come from ignorance about how opioids affect the mind and body.

Families put on their happy faces and act as if they have accepted the loss.
But have they?

The empty hole within them grows bigger when there is no outlet for the pain.

Society expects grief to have a beginning and an end.

The DSM-V even puts a time frame on grief. If grief lasts more than a year, you can be diagnosed with Prolonged Grief Disorder.

While this disorder isn't considered a mental illness, it implies that people who grieve for too long have something wrong with them.

Grief is never really over. It is something we carry in our souls.

As a result of the stigma surrounding SUD, customary rituals, support, and traditions are lost.

Loved ones are left feeling alone and labeled as though they have somehow contributed to the crime.

Loved ones suffer shame when society assumes a person deserves to die for their choices.

The only other time people feel remorse over losing a loved one is when they did something wrong or contributed to the death.

In most opioid overdoses, this is not the case.

Families desperately try to get help for their loved ones.

They argue, bargain, pray, plead and end up angry and frustrated.

They don't sleep at night, waiting for that call that eventually comes for them.
In many cases, several calls did not result in death but contributed to their understanding that a fatal call was imminent.

Loved ones are not the only ones suffering from the impact of opioid overdose.

First responders, medical professionals, law enforcement, treatment communities, church families, teachers, and neighbors all suffer from the opioid crisis.

We are hard-pressed to find anyone today that does not know someone who died of an opioid overdose.

These individuals have even less of an opportunity to grieve.
They are supposed to have "professional distance" and move on.

These individuals, however, are increasingly experiencing empathy fatigue, vicarious trauma, and developing symptoms similar to relatives of deceased loved

ones.

We lack support and acknowledgment in these professions.

Imagine a first responder going to the same house multiple times to Narcan the same individual, only to return later that day or the next week and find the individual dead.

Imagine the ER Doctors and Nurses who treat multiple overdoses every day, with some ending in death or permanent injury.

Being deprived of oxygen leads to brain damage.

Passing out in a position that cuts off circulation to a limb can lead to permanent damage or loss of limb.

These are common occurrences that medical professionals encounter regularly.

We wonder why people leave jobs they love or are so shut down emotionally that their families can't even live with them.

When we do not acknowledge the impact of the opioid epidemic on these individuals, we ignore their pain.
Co-workers and supervisors often shame them if they express any grief.

Unexpressed grief will live in the body until it is released, and when there is no outlet, it can result in health issues, stress responses, depression, and even suicide.

The best way to mourn a loss is up to each of us. Everyone's experience is different.

The critical thing to remember is that we must allow ourselves to feel intense feelings, or grief can damage our bodies, mental health, and spirit.

Many blessings,

Sandy

PS. Keep reading below for helpful ways to cope with grief during the holidays and upcoming trainings. ⬇

How to Cope with Grief During the Holidays

According to David Kessler, a leading expert on grieving, finding meaning in life again is the last stage of grief.

2. Keep your lost loved ones present in your lives.

For family members, I encourage you to speak the lost loved one's name often.

Include them in the conversations as if they were away at school or on vacation.

"Laura would have really enjoyed seeing the children during the holidays."

Allow the individual to be present and

Processing and moving through grief leads to exponential growth.

You can't heal what you can't feel.

This statement is true for everyone.

People can move from grief to growth when they have space to grieve without stigma, shame, or guilt.

I would like to share some helpful ways to cope with grief during the holiday and provide safe outlets to heal and move through these powerful emotions.

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1. Acknowledge the loss.

For family members, it is ok to set the table with an empty seat.

Tell stories about the person. Laugh, cry, and remember.

It is important to acknowledge your feelings instead of avoiding them.

keep their memory alive.

3. Use a creative outlet to help process the grief.

Journaling is an effective outlet for those who do not have an outlet for their grief.

Our brains do not know the difference between speaking something out loud, writing it down on paper, or typing it into a word document.

Writing, drawing, poetry, music, and dance are other healthy ways to express grief.

4. Ask for help when struggling with grief.

It is important to seek support from friends, family, coworkers, and professionals if necessary.

Whether or not you have lost someone close to you, the holidays can stir up many complicated feelings.

It's completely normal, and it can be helpful to seek services from a therapist or psychologist.

Check Out the Blog

Working in any kind of healthcare system today is challenging.

Anxiety and fear are whittling away at morale, causing health concerns that lead to more missed days at work and burnout.

What do we do?

If you missed out on the September Blog, follow the link below to read my four helpful tips for building resiliency in the healthcare field.

Read the full Blog here

Register for our Upcoming Training Events

Virtual Trauma 101 - Trauma Informed Care

Who should attend?

- Human Service Providers
- Medical Providers
- Criminal Justice Professionals

Virtual Trauma 101 provides all the basics of Trauma Informed Care for human service providers, medical providers, and criminal justice professionals. This foundational training teaches you the skills to avoid retraumatization, recognize trauma responses, understand fight/flight/freeze/fawn/collapse/tend/befriend, and emotional co-regulation.

Two-thirds of people entering Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment have experienced trauma. Women entering treatment for SUD have a higher rate of sexual trauma and domestic violence. The statistics show that 85% of women in SUD treatment have experienced sexual abuse. Current research is showing that trauma is the underlying core issue for substance use disorder. Prepare yourself and your agency to tackle this critical problem while insulating yourself from vicarious trauma.

This training is being offered through collaborations with Lisa Ardner and registration is through Lisa's Eventbrite.

- This class is a pre-requisite for our Trauma Responsiveness and Trauma Debriefing class.

Date and Times:
12/5/22, 12/6/22

12:00 pm - 3:30 PM EST

Location: Virtual Event

Cost: $115

[Register Now]

Healing From Loss

A journey through grief, mourning, and acceptance.

Learn to become comfortable with working with grief and loss

We have lost over 1M people to Opioid Overdose.

Each of those individuals had families, friends, and community support people who were all impacted by the death.

This workshop is for anyone who wants

Through self-exploration, role play, and expressive arts activities, you will learn how to hold space for grief, acknowledge the loss easily, and allow the individual to keep the memory of

to become more comfortable working with grief.

The stigma of SUD often impedes people's ability to grieve the loss due to a lack of support, shame, and a sense of self-blame that they didn't do enough.

They often lack community support, rituals and other ways that help people mourn.

We will explore the depth of grief and challenge the concept that it has a beginning and an end.

We will learn about mourning as the active component of grief that moves individuals toward acceptance.

their loved one alive.

This workshop is approved by NYS OASAS for 6 renewal hours for CASAC/CPP/CPS.

Date and Times:
1/25/2023

9:00 am - 4:00 PM EST

Location: Virtual Event

Cost: $125

[Register Now]

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