

TIPS & SCRIPTS

FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH & FAMILIES NAVIGATING A SUBSTANCE-RELATED LOSS



Lead with Presence & Compassion

Focus on being present and creating space. Avoid rushing the grief process or trying to fix it - remember, it is okay to not be okay.

"I know there are no words to make it better. Just know I'm here and you don't have to carry this alone."

Reduce Blame & Shame



Gently address self-blame in both youth and caregivers; substance-related loss often carries "what ifs."

"This isn't your fault. Addiction is a complex illness, and no one person can cause or control it."



Validate Complex Emotions

Normalize the wide range of emotions that can come up for both children and adults.

"People often feel many different things after a loss - sadness, anger, confusion, shame, even relief. All of those feelings are valid."

Use Person-First Language

Use honest, non-judgmental language that recognizes substance use disorder as a complex health condition and public health challenge.



"Your _____ died from a complex condition called addiction. It can affect the brain and body and make it very hard for someone to stay safe."



Normalize A Variety of Grief Responses

Help families understand that grief may show up in physical, emotional, and behavioral ways.

"Grief can affect sleep, mood, energy, and behavior - for both youth and adults. These are normal responses to something really hard. How has grief been showing up for you or your family?"

Keep the Conversation Open



Encourage ongoing dialogue with both youth and caregivers; needs and questions evolve over time.

"Grief can change and evolve over time. I'm here to talk and support you throughout your seasons of grief."

Honor the Whole Person

Help families remember and talk about the person beyond their substance use, reducing stigma and preserving connection.



"I'd love to learn more about your person if you feel comfortable sharing. What are some special memories you have together?"

Avoid Harsh Comments and Generalizations

Model language that reduces stigma and avoids minimizing or blaming.



Instead of:

- "They brought this on themselves"
- "All things happen for a reason"
- "At least they're no longer suffering"
- "I'm sorry for your loss"

Try:

- "You may feel like you have to be strong, but you don't have to be with me"



RESOURCES

FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH & FAMILIES NAVIGATING A SUBSTANCE-RELATED LOSS

SAFE Project

Prevention: Helping families through proactive support, caring connections, and education to promote health, well-being, and resilience.

SAFE Project's Prevention Point Segments deliver messages that explore what prevention looks like in everyday life, breaking concepts down so that they are understandable, relatable, and easy to apply.

End Stigma: Join SAFE Project's No Shame Movement. Your voice matters! By challenging harmful stereotypes and choosing language rooted in dignity and respect, we help create a world where people feel safe to speak openly about their experiences and ask for help when they need it.

Opioid Overdose Response: Approximately every 7 minutes, a fatal overdose occurs in the United States, 64.4% of which involve opioids. You can learn how to use naloxone to reverse an overdose in one minute. Access SAFE Project's Opioid Overdose Response Training.

Eluna

Camps: Eluna operates camps in nearly 50 locations across the U.S. and Canada for youth and families impacted by grief or addiction. Eluna's two camp programs are offered at no cost to families: Camp Erin, the largest grief camp network for school aged youth and their families; Camp Mariposa, an addiction prevention and mentoring program for youth ages 9-17. Find a camp near you.

Personalized Support: The Eluna Resource Center offers confidential guidance and free resources in English and Spanish to further support youth and their caregivers navigating grief or substance misuse in the family. Request Support.

Eluna Resource Center: Explore Eluna's Resource Library and National Program Guide to find activities, conversation starters, recommended books and local referrals for children, teens, and families impacted by grief or addiction. Find a resource or support program.

