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For Immediate Release

Individuals mourning loved ones who died of overdose do not want to hear ‘You dodged a bullet’; Grief Support Group works to heal & reduce stigma

Morgantown, WV (Sept. 7, 2021) — While the COVID-19 pandemic surges, there is a quieter epidemic that has been plaguing West Virginia for years: overdose. According to the National Institutes of Health, West Virginia has the highest rate of opioid-involved overdose deaths per 100,000 people.

With each life lost to overdose, there are family and friends who are left behind. If you are one of those people, the Monongalia County Quick Response Team (QRT) wants to show you that you are not alone with its Grief Support Group, which meets on the first and third Mondays of each month at Sabra United Methodist Church, 1234 Richwood Ave.

This specific type of grief support group is a necessity, noted Mark A. Liptrap, Monongalia County Health Department’s social worker and a QRT member.

“There is a vast difference between losing someone to an overdose versus losing someone to other causes. There is a lot of stigmatization happening,” Liptrap said. “When someone finds out your loved one died from an overdose, their support shifts to judgment.”

For instance, Liptrap noted, his clients have shared some heartbreaking stories of what some of their friends or family members have told them after the death of a partner due to overdose.

“They’ve heard things like, ‘You’re better off without him’ or ‘You dodged a bullet,’” Liptrap said. “We all need to work together to reduce this stigma.”

The next meeting will be held at 7 p.m. Monday, Sept. 20, and attendees should have no trouble figuring out the entrance to use to find the group: Pastor Stephen Prince painted the door a bright yellow to make it more visible.

Prince and Liptrap will lead the meetings, joined by another QRT member who has lost a loved one to overdose.

That means that while Prince and Liptrap can bring their professional skills to the table, there will also be someone with firsthand experience of this particular type of grief who can demonstrate that no one has to go through it alone.

MCHD received grant funding to establish the multi-agency QRT, which is dedicated to reducing opioid use and overdoses. First responders, public health, peer recovery coaches and others meet weekly to strategize about ways to help. Peer recovery coaches make phone calls and go out and knock on doors to try to talk to anyone who has overdosed within 24-72 hours to help connect them to services and, ultimately, treatment.

Since its launch in early 2019, the QRT has also provided training in naloxone, which reverses the effects of an opioid overdose, and other resources for those in need of support.

Liptrap, who works with individuals to find needed resources in the community, has heard stories from clients about their treatment after the death of a loved one because of substance misuse.

“In this group,” he said, “the need specific to someone who has experienced the loss of someone due to an overdose is going to be heard, valued, appreciated, supported, catered and nurtured in a non-judgmental way.”

A client of Liptrap’s, who wishes not to be named, was happy to find the group, having lost a loved one to an overdose.

“I realized there was a need for a group of this nature in the area,” she said. “Having attended regular group therapy and grief group therapy in the past, it’s important to be able to talk to someone who can truly understand you when other people might be judgmental.”

Judgment surrounding substance use disorder is no secret. According to the American Addiction Centers (americanaddictioncenters.org), 1 in 3 Americans will know someone who dies of an overdose, meaning it is more important than ever to provide support to those who have lost a loved one to an overdose.

Liptrap’s client found that attending the grief support group and speaking to those who had been through similar situations was especially helpful. “It is so important to have people with resources and who are able to use a tragedy to bring more love and kindness and caring and compassion into the world,” she said.

After this patient suggested a support group for those who lost someone due to overdose or substance use disorder, Prince offered Sabra United Methodist Church as the place to meet. Because the support group is connected to the QRT, participants can also receive other kinds of help and access to resources. “There’s more to loss than just grief,” Prince said. “They might need help with rent, or with their kids.”

The healing power of support groups is well-documented. The facilitation of a sense of belonging within this group might be enough to help just one person dealing with the death of their loved one.

“If someone is concerned about any type of judgment surrounding their grief, this is the group for them,” Liptrap said.

For up-to-date information on health and wellness in Monongalia County, check out monchd.org and follow the health department on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd. More information on the Monongalia County QRT can be found at @MonCoWVQRT and monchd.org/mon-co-qrt.html.

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