

My name is Martha Rae and I am from Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs. I am the senior virtual family support practitioner. Part of my role is co-ordinating the bereavement service which is a counselling service specifically for people who have been bereaved through substance use.

We often find that when we are speaking with family members who have lost someone through substance use, they are talking about all the expected feelings that everyone will feel around bereavement and loss. We also find that people have additional, more complex issues going on. There could be feelings of guilt, that they maybe could have done more for the person when they were alive. One of the startling things with all drug and alcohol related deaths is that they are all premature and every single one of them are preventable. So that's quite drastic for family members who are dealing with the death of their loved one, that this death didn't need to happen. That's quite a big feeling to explore and try figure out where they are at with that, I suppose.

We often have complications around media coverage, stigmatisation and sensational media coverage of stories. Stigma is a huge issue for families. They have this sense of disenfranchised grief, this idea that they are not entitled to grief for some reason, that they should have seen it coming. A family member I had spoken to recently, whose 22-year-old son had died from a drug overdose and she told people that he had died in a car accident as she felt they were more sympathetic, more empathetic. The main issues that we find are that people are labelled, so the mum whose adult child has died from substance abuse, they lose the fact that they were once a baby who they had great hopes for, they lose the fact that they were a kind young guy who would have given anything to his family, who would have done anything for them. More often than not, they will speak of over sensitive people. My son was very sensitive to the world, he was impacted by it, he was too empathetic, and therefore he had to self-medicate in many ways. And unfortunately, when they have died - a 'drug addict' has died, and this is the kind of media stories, this is the general feeling from people they speak to. Family members are left feeling that they are unjustified in their grief and loss and it is quite a lonely place to be. So, we work with people to try and reduce that stigma, generally across a wider population and the self-stigma they put on themselves for that. That's where we try to work with families.

Part of my role, I am going to be presenting later families who are impacted by substance abuse and the areas around their complicated grief, I think is the best way to describe it. Part of the reason I try to get out to these areas and why we exist as an organisation is to try to reduce stigma and speak about people. That it is people, not necessarily a 'drug user' not the stigmatised judgemental language used. We often hear about alkies, junkies. We are labelling people and putting them into a box. That's not helping the grieving process for families who are impacted by this.

What we try to encourage people to do, is to remember everyone who has been bereaved is an individual. Their grieving process will be different to some people, it's not to put assumptions onto people about how they will feel. Often, we hear from families that have people say to them "you must be relieved though" and they will feel "No, I am not relieved. This is my child, my husband your talking about", whoever they have lost. Trying not to put assumptions, language is so important. Speaking to people about their child, it is not a drug addict, a type of person. The key

message we try to get out is that it is everyone's responsibility to show compassion and empathy, no matter what the subject is.

Unfortunately, most families are impacted by drug or alcohol use, it is indiscriminatory drug and alcohol use. The more we try to cover it up, the more we try to hide the fact that this is an issue. It is not helping anything. It is not helping the grieving process for people how have unfortunately lost someone through substance use, but it also doesn't help people get better. I think that is why I am here today, just to talk about that and to highlight these things and try to change people's opinions hopefully.

The film was produced in March 2020 and can be found at [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk) or <https://vimeo.com/392426314>

For more information visit [www.sad.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk) or contact [supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk)

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