



***Living with bereavement
by drug-related death in
Ireland:***

***Grief experiences for
people in active addiction
at the time of a peer's
drug-related death***

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Family

Community

Close bonded
friendships

The girls

The lads

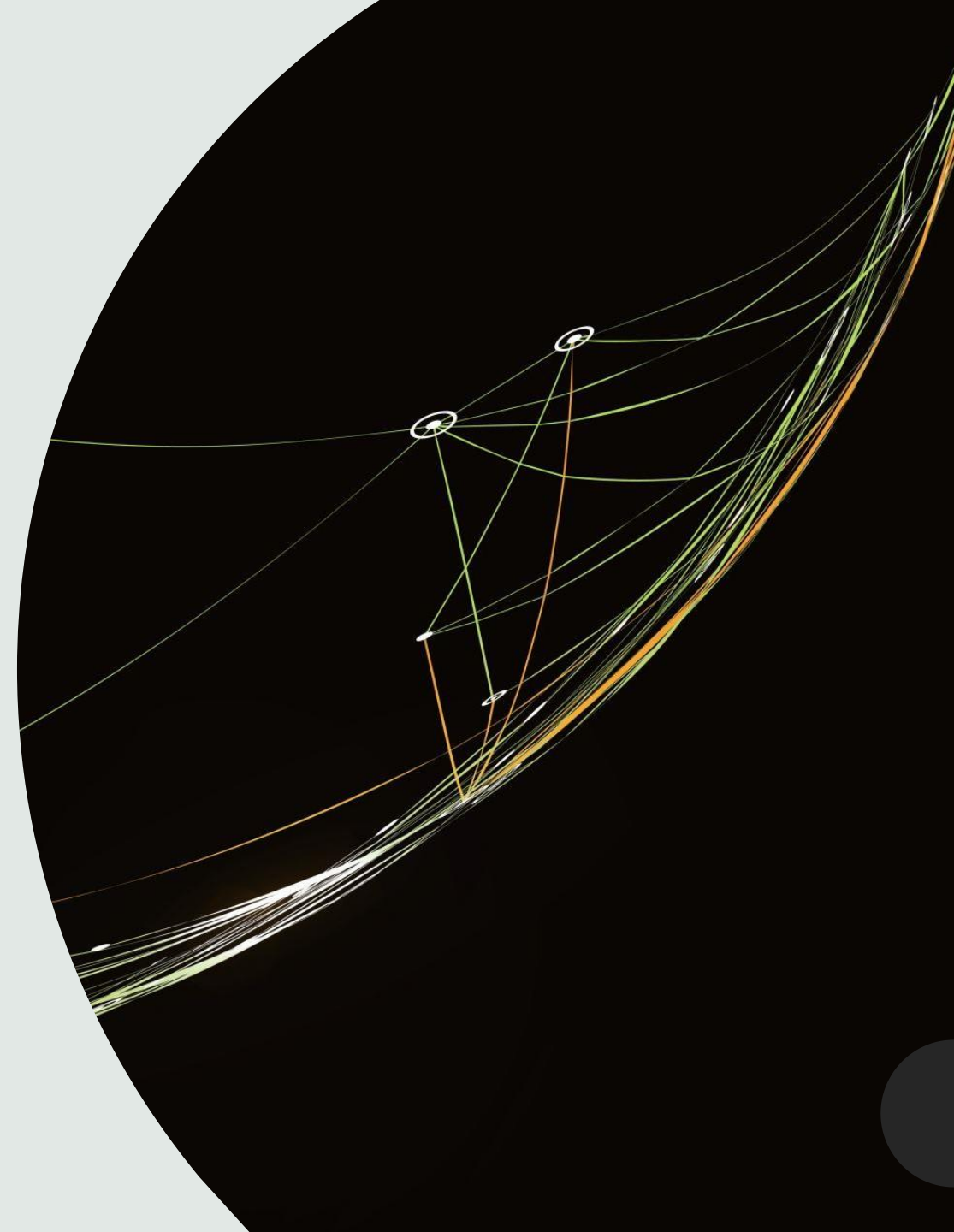
Best friend

*I watched it online, the funeral. Jesus, I was just **heartbroken**. My family then looking at me going 'sure she hardly even knew her'. 'She was just in treatment with her'. But that **connection** you make with people in a treatment centre, it's just **unbelievable**. Like all those girls like. I'm still in contact with a good few of them.*

*Because you're so **lost** and you're so **alone** when you go into a treatment centre and finally you have somebody that is experiencing the exact same things you're experiencing. Because addiction is hugely isolating, you know?*

*I mean I grieved now **like it was a parent**.*

Quote from Beth



Drug-related Deaths

(HRB, 2019; Titlestad et al., 2019)

Overdose/poisoning deaths directly associated with the intake of substances or polydrug use.

Deaths linked to drug use where the death is a cause of infectious disease, suicide, violence, medical complications, or accidents.

From 2008-2017, there were over 6900 drug-related deaths in Ireland

In 2020, there were **409** poisoning deaths and **397** non-poisoning deaths.

806 drug-related deaths in 2020.



Drug-related deaths

Key Characteristics

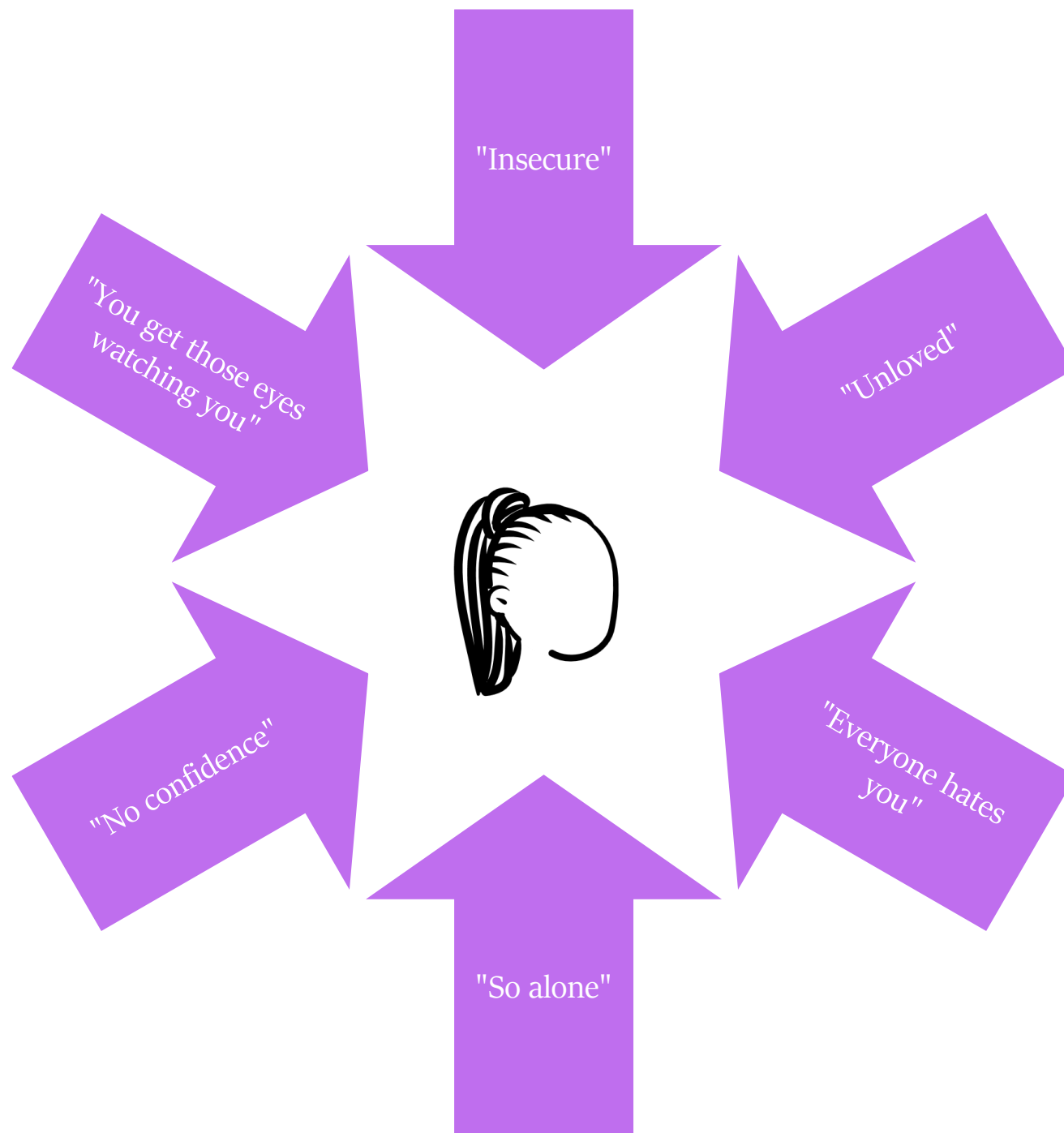
1. Abrupt losses by non-natural causes loaded with social and moral stigmas.
2. Drug-related deaths **challenge societal values**.
3. Grief occurs against a cultural backdrop that often criminalises the drug user and those associated.

Methodology

Semi-structured
interviews

6 people who are now in
recovery that
experienced the drug-
related death of a peer
while in active addiction

Interpretative
Phenomenological
Analysis



Family

Community

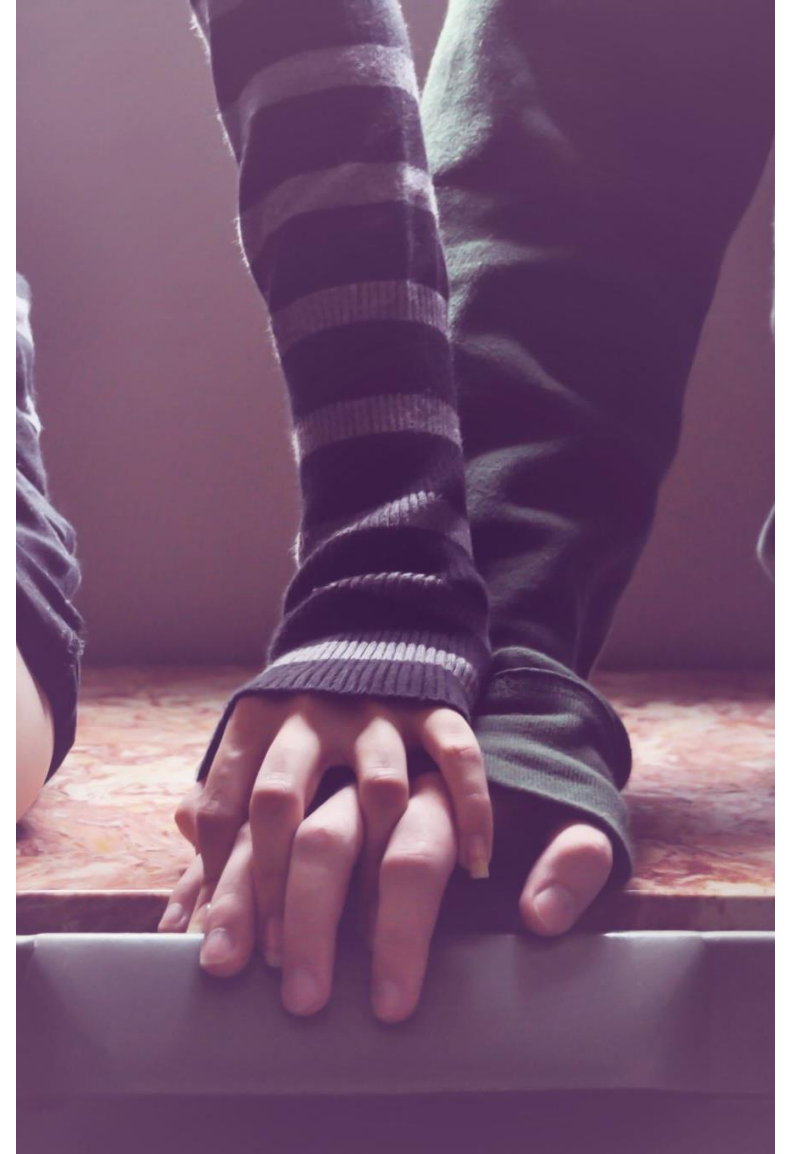
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*I was never in my family home. I was always out on the streets. So, the friendships that I formed, were basically my **family**... Even though it was around substances, but they were all coming from traumatic experiences as well and they were on the streets too, so who better to **support one another**... From a very young age, my dad was in and out of jail. So, I turned to the streets for that friendship, that male **role model**.*



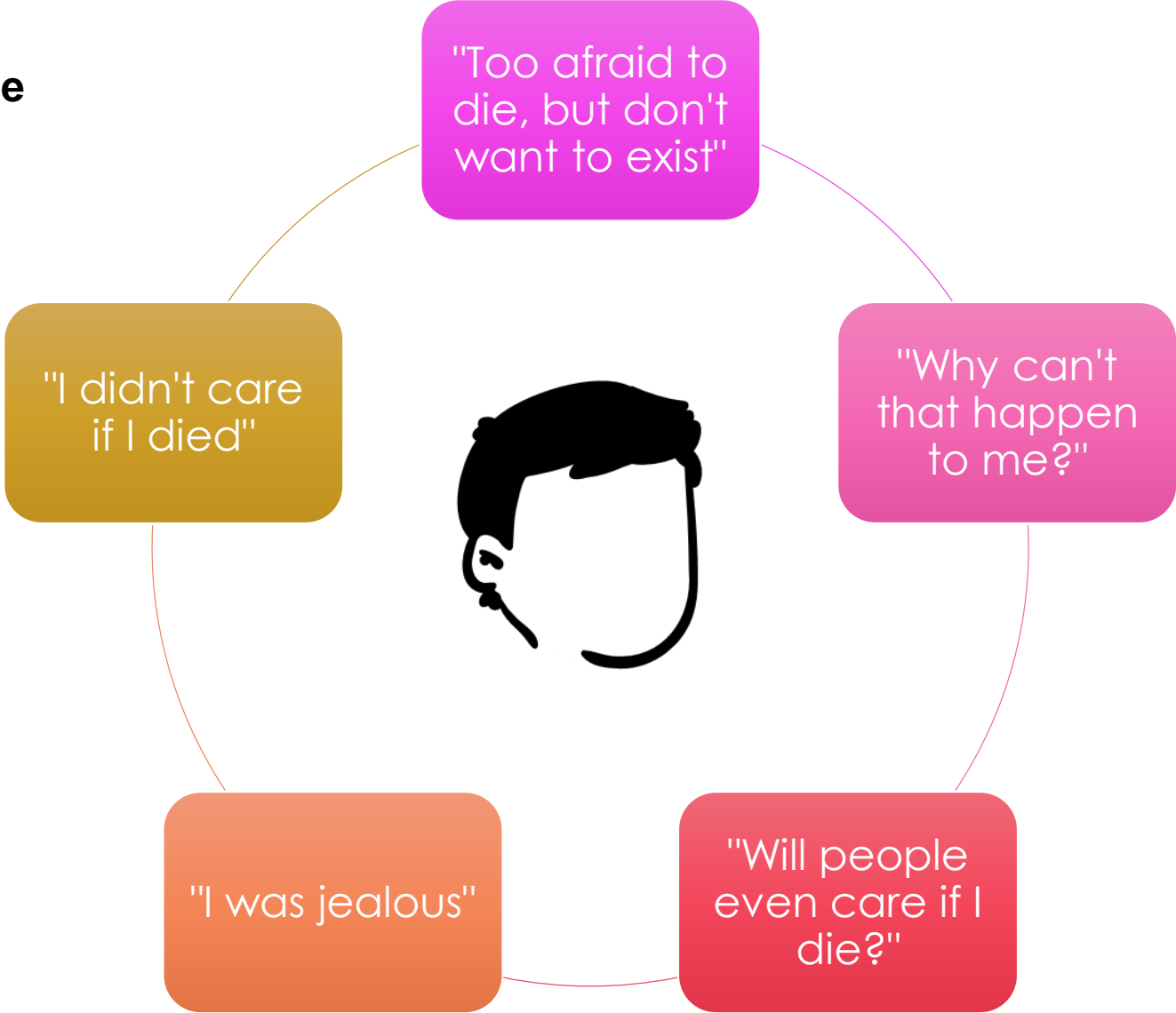
Disenfranchised Grief



If I tell [family] someone has died that I went to school with, or then died from a drug-related death, their reaction is so different, **it kills me.**

And I don't even talk about it because I... I'd get so **angry**, I'd **internalise** it. I'd feel it inside, I'd be so **frustrated** and **angry** with them for their reaction to it.

Internal dialogue following the drug-death of a peer





"I ran into his mother and the next day I got a phone call. He was after overdosing and dying. And then only a couple of weeks ago, I was driving past his mother, and I put my head down to hide.

Because I was **ashamed**... I used to use with her son. And now he's dead and I'm alive, and here I am driving a car. I felt **guilty** and I... I know this woman since I was 10 years old. That's the madness of it. I just felt **awful**."

Implications for Drug Use

Drug use increased

"Heroin and tablets. Just went through the roof like. I mean like, bad like. Proper "forget everything", 30 xanax a day like. And a bag of heroin. I'm lucky to be alive I swear to god."

Struggles with emotional regulation led to emotional suppression

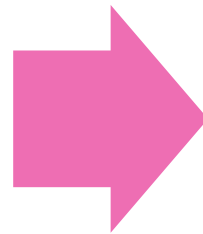
"A friend that died, he was the godfather to my child...And sure I didn't know how to cope with that. We were arguing at the time. And he died, I can't change the last thing that I said to him... The only way I knew how to mask it was putting more substances in my body."



Recollection of Traumatic Experience

I woke up about 7 in the morning. And he was blue on the floor, after not breathing. I tried to give him CPR. I was ringing the ambulance, they came, had the machine over him with a chest pump, and his ribs were breaking, it was unbelievably traumatic. Because he was my best friend, and he was dead next to me in the bed.

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There was an inquest, and I felt like I was being attacked. I was the only person there with him. I understand now that they had lost their son, but at the time I was like "What the f***, I'm his best friend, I wouldn't do anything to hurt him." I'd rather be in his position, at that time I wanted to die like.

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I was diagnosed with PTSD from the doctor, from that, from him dying, and when I was at the inquest his dad was shouting and roaring at me. He probably still blames me to this day, I'd never spoken to him again and I used to be up with that family every Christmas.

Where do we go from here?

- Development of bereavement-specific supports.
- A trauma-informed approach to understanding the nature of addiction, and broader societal recognition of the depth of connection between peers.
- The social construction of drug use as a criminal justice issue neglects to understand the implications of trauma, creating a disenfranchised grief for those in active addiction.



*Everything
is
Possible*

*Reclaimed
Potential*

I've changed that narrative now. Look where I am in comparison to the start of the year. I feel like I'm starting to live a normal life now. I'm not being controlled by a drug anymore.

When I was up in treatment, it was the hardest thing ever. But I never laughed so much in my whole life. Naturally laugh, not under the influence or anything. Real laughing like.

Everything is still new to me. Going for dinner, on a date, sober, it's all new like. It's a nervousness and it's all this weird feeling. It's unbelievable, you can't beat it. It's a natural high.



Potential Lives On

My life now these days is giving back in some way. It is starting to repair the lives of all those young people that I was friends with that didn't make it...And in those moments, I see Jean's face. I see Sean's face. I see all of us as the young people that we were, now hopefully getting the trauma informed care that's necessary.

Therefore, the best part of them lives on. Their potential lives on because I'm doing it for all of us now.

Thank you!



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