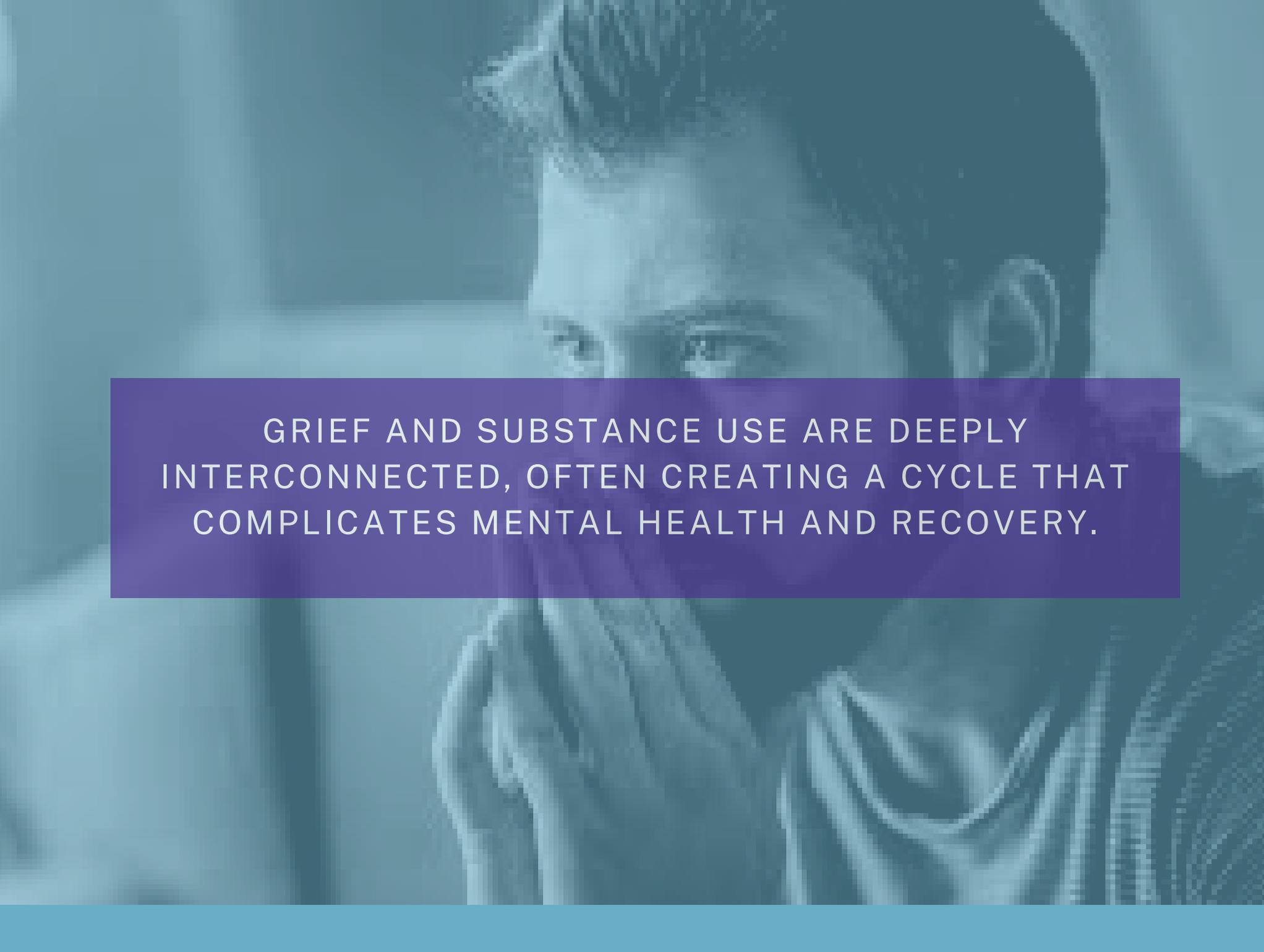




OPIOID OVERDOSE IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS IN BALTIMORE

# Complicated Grief, Substance Use & Overdose

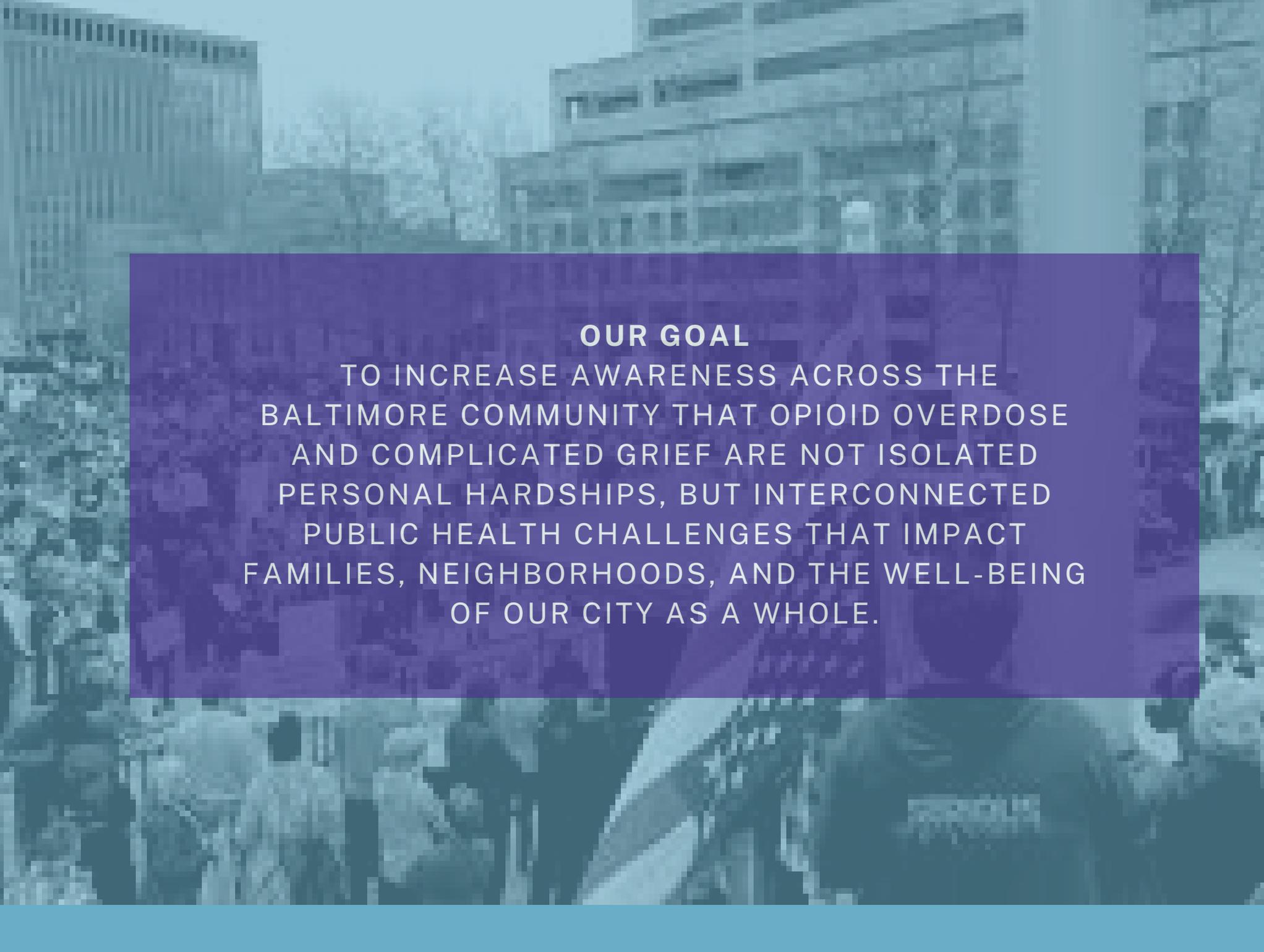
Together, we will turn this around!



GRIEF AND SUBSTANCE USE ARE DEEPLY  
INTERCONNECTED, OFTEN CREATING A CYCLE THAT  
COMPLICATES MENTAL HEALTH AND RECOVERY.

A blurred photograph of a woman with dark curly hair and a man in a white lab coat, overlaid with a purple text box. The woman is in the foreground, looking down, and the man is in the background, also looking down. The overall image has a teal tint.

THIS PRESENTATION PROVIDES A COMPREHENSIVE  
OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS THAT  
HIGHLIGHT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GRIEF AND  
OPIOID OVERDOSE



## **OUR GOAL**

TO INCREASE AWARENESS ACROSS THE BALTIMORE COMMUNITY THAT OPIOID OVERDOSE AND COMPLICATED GRIEF ARE NOT ISOLATED PERSONAL HARDSHIPS, BUT INTERCONNECTED PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGES THAT IMPACT FAMILIES, NEIGHBORHOODS, AND THE WELL-BEING OF OUR CITY AS A WHOLE.



# Complicated Grief and Substance Use

Complicated Grief is a prolonged and intensified form of mourning in which feelings of loss remain persistent, overwhelming, and disruptive to daily life. Individuals may experience ongoing emotional pain, difficulty accepting the death, and challenges that affect their physical health, relationships, and ability to function. Clinically, it is also known as Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder.

Masferrer L, Garre-Olmo J, Caparrós B. Is complicated grief a risk factor for substance use? A comparison of substance-users and normative grievers. *Addiction Research & Theory*. 2017 Sep 3;25(5):361-7.



# Complicated Grief and Substance Use

Research shows that Complicated Grief (CG) and Substance Use Disorder (SUD) often co-occur and can reinforce one another in a harmful cycle.



# Complicated Grief and Substance Use

The intense emotional pain of loss may increase vulnerability to substance use.

Substance use can interfere with the natural grieving process.

Ongoing use may make it significantly harder to process loss and move toward healing.



# Complicated Grief and Substance Use

When grief and substance use intersect, individuals may require integrated, trauma-informed support to break the cycle.

Source: Masferrer L, Garre-Olmo J, Caparrós B. Is complicated grief a risk factor for substance use? A comparison of substance-users and normative grievers. *Addiction Research & Theory*. 2017 Sep 3;25(5):361-7.

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# Risk Factors for Complicated Grief



# RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING COMPLICATED GRIEF SYMPTOMS

## **RELATIONSHIP TO THE DECEASED**

Among individuals with Substance Use Disorder (SUD), the death of a sibling has been identified as a significant risk factor for developing complicated grief.

# RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING COMPLICATED GRIEF SYMPTOMS

## CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEATH

Traumatic losses — including accidents, suicide, homicide, and overdose — are associated with a higher likelihood of complicated grief compared to deaths from natural causes.



## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### HIGH PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

Individuals who feel supported by family and friends are significantly less likely to develop CG symptoms.



## PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

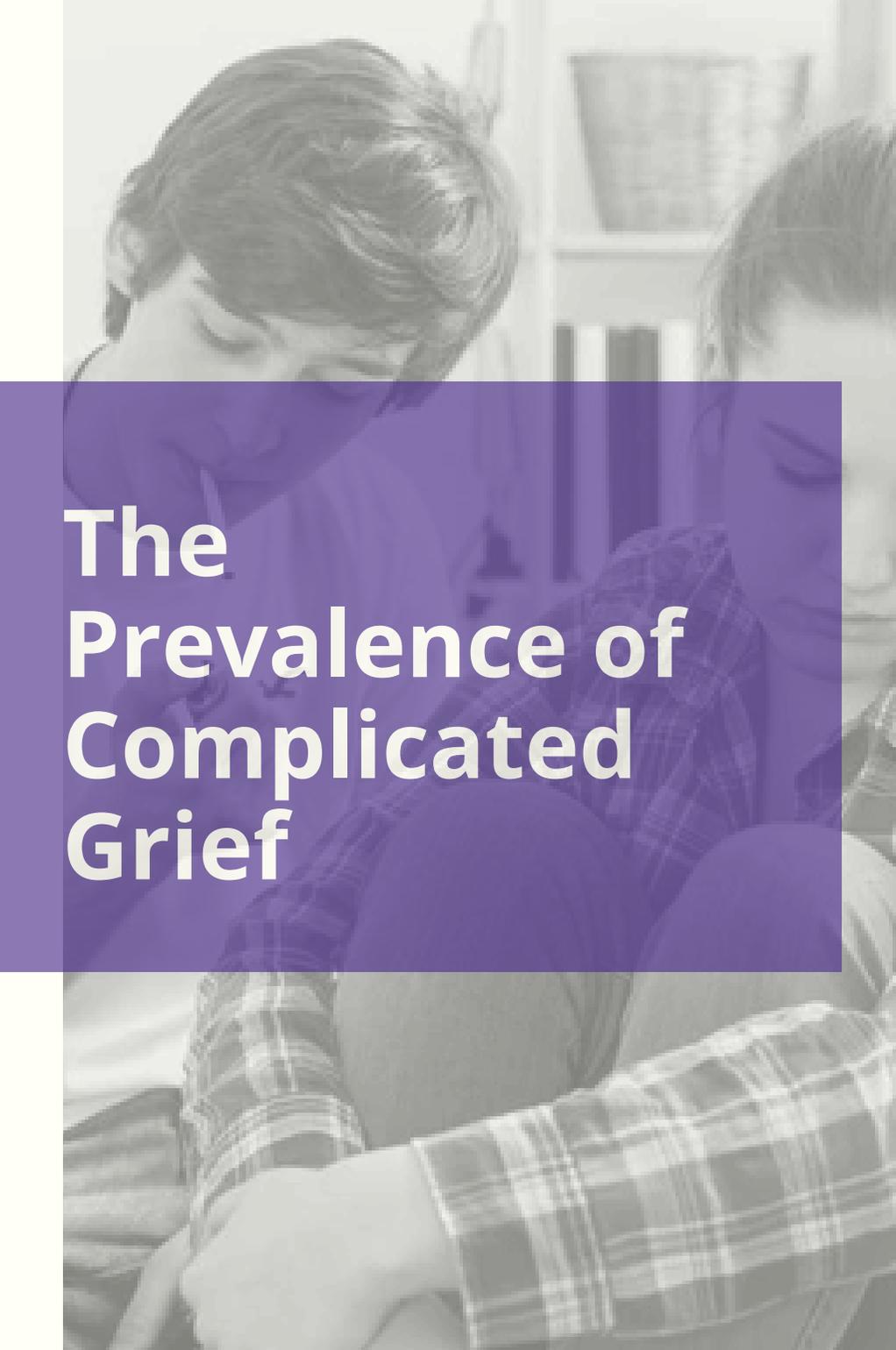
### NEED FOR SPECIALIZED CARE

There is a critical need to diagnose and treat bereaved individuals with SUD, as they are a particularly vulnerable subgroup of the population.

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## Fast Facts: Grief and Substance Use Disorder

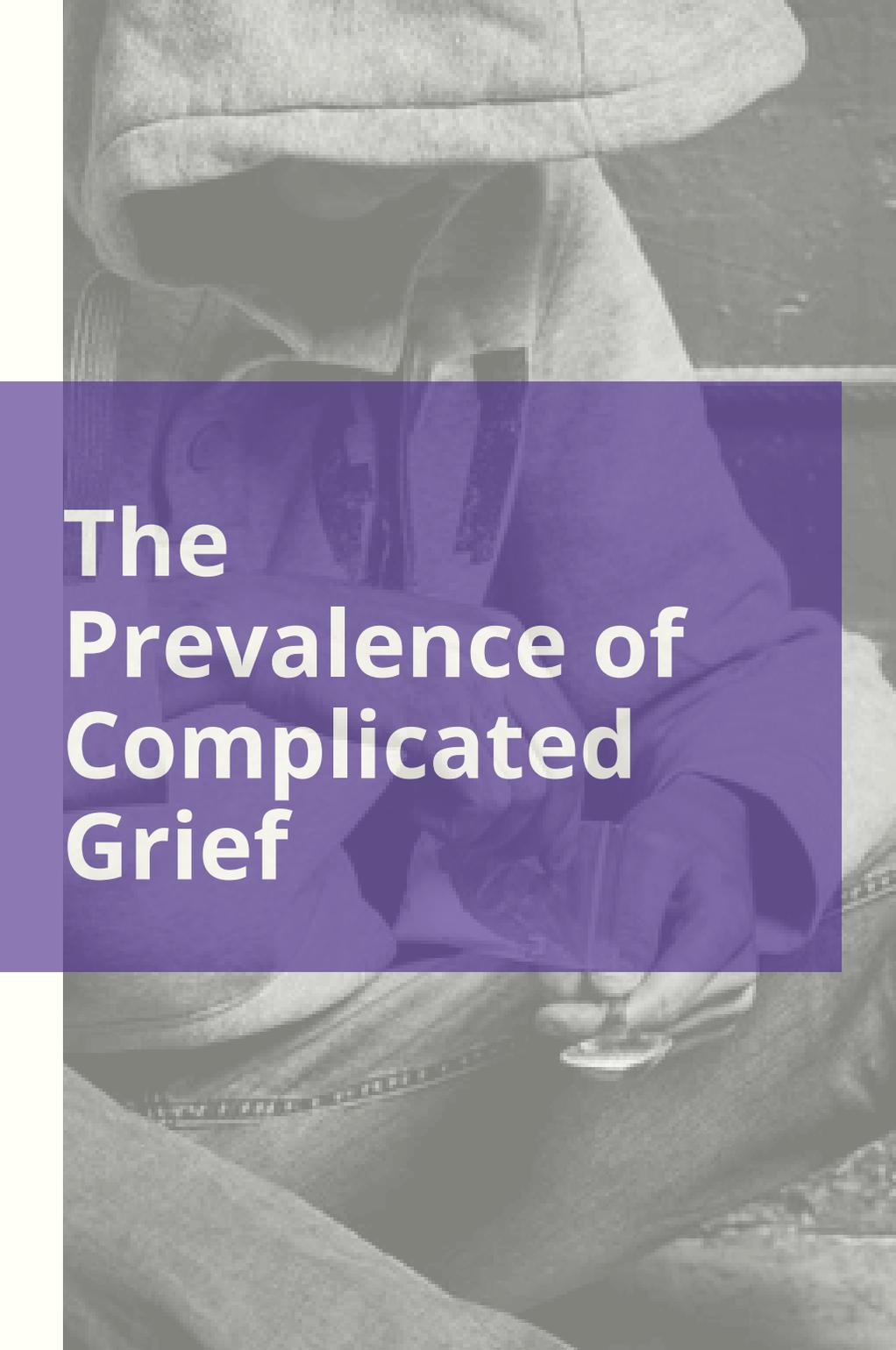


# The Prevalence of Complicated Grief



## HIGH RATES IN ADDICTION

While complicated grief prevalence in the general population ranges from 2.4% to 22.7%, it is significantly higher among those with substance use disorder, reaching approximately 34.2%.

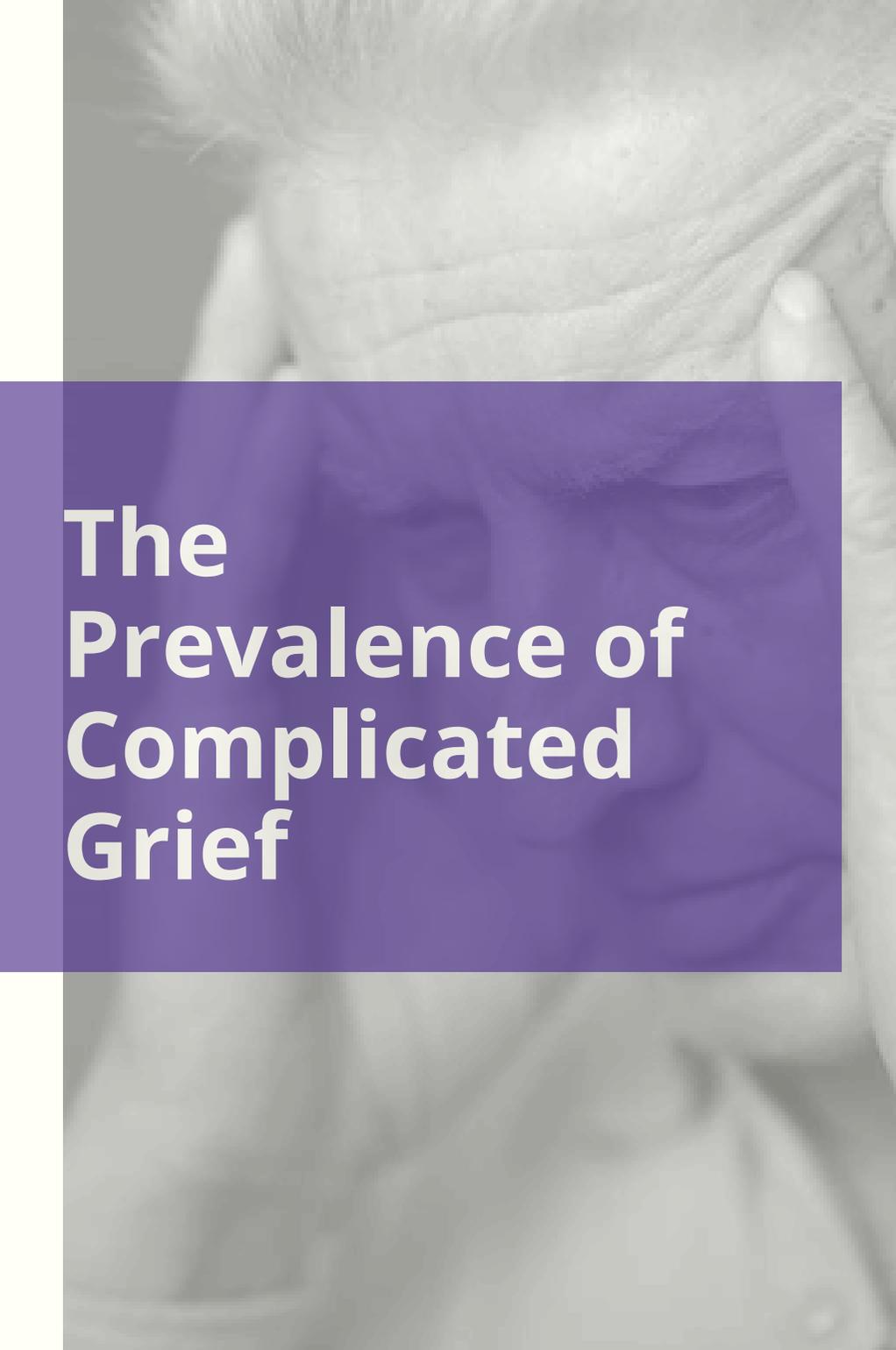
A grayscale photograph of a person wearing a grey hoodie, sitting on a bench. The person's hands are clasped in their lap, and they are looking down. A semi-transparent purple rectangle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing white text.

# The Prevalence of Complicated Grief



## VULNERABILITY

People with substance use disorder are more vulnerable to experiencing complications in bereavement than the general population.



# The Prevalence of Complicated Grief



## MALADAPTIVE PATTERNS

Complicated grief in patients with substance use disorder is strongly associated with less adaptive coping strategies, including social withdrawal.



# Clinical Implications for the Community



The co-occurrence of two serious health conditions (*addiction and complicated grief*) has been shown to be related to poorer management of stressful situations.

Source: Caparrós B, Masferrer L. Coping strategies and complicated grief in a substance use disorder sample. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2021 Jan 15;11:624065.

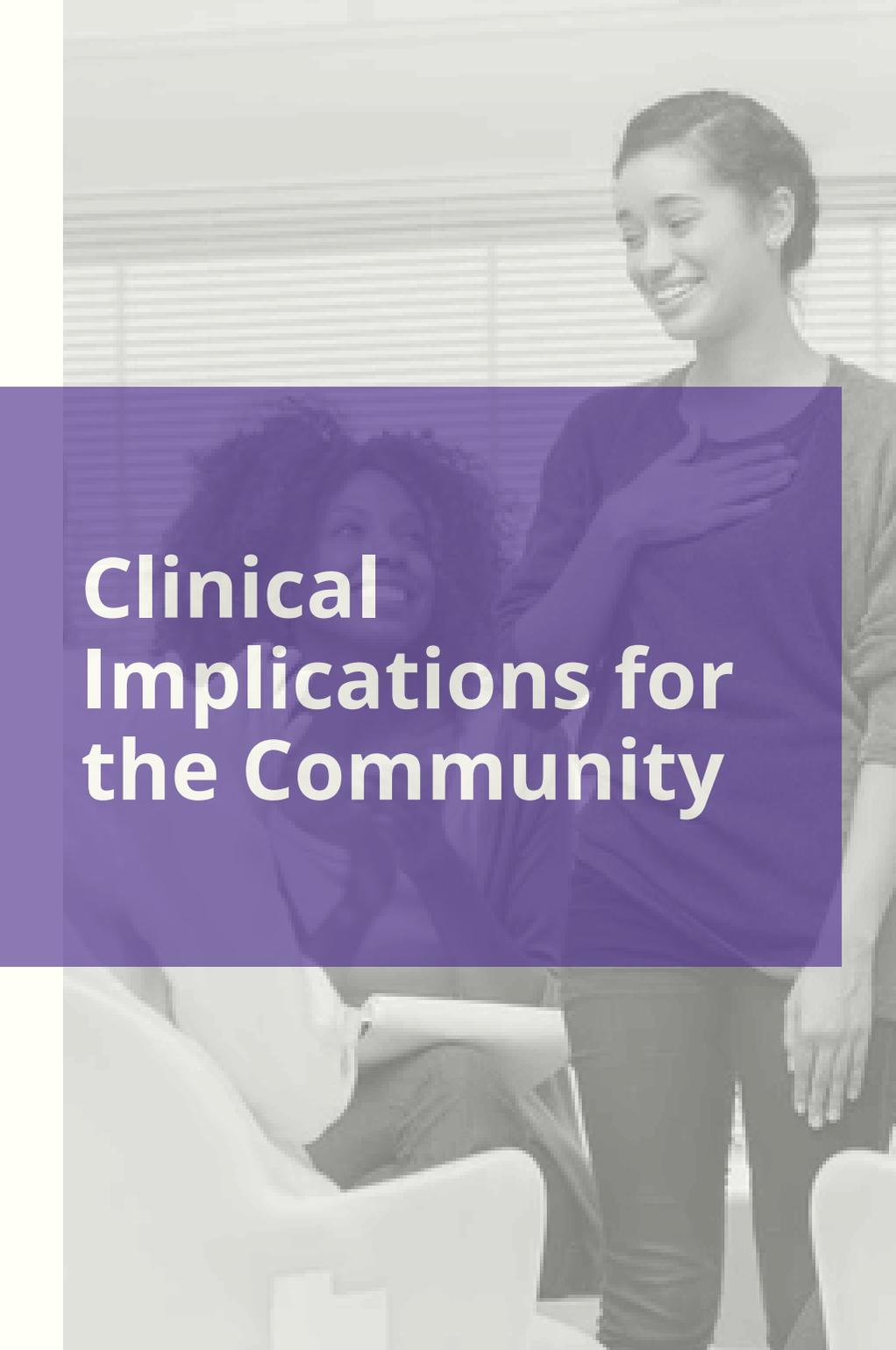


# Clinical Implications for the Community



## INTEGRATED TREATMENT

Recovery programs should address grief and addiction simultaneously rather than as separate issues.



# Clinical Implications for the Community



## TARGETED SKILLS

Effective therapy should focus on decreasing self-criticism, social withdrawal, and wishful thinking while increasing problem-solving and social support skills.

A young Black man is sitting in a light-colored armchair, looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. He is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and light-colored jeans. The background is a bright, slightly blurred indoor setting.

# Clinical Implications for the Community



## EARLY INTERVENTION

Training individuals in effective coping strategies can potentially prevent further mental health complications and improve the course of substance use disorder treatment.

## COPING MECHANISMS

### HIGH PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT

Individuals who feel supported by family and friends are significantly less likely to develop CG symptoms.



## PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

### NEED FOR SPECIALIZED CARE

There is a critical need to diagnose and treat bereaved individuals with SUD, as they are a particularly vulnerable subgroup of the population.



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## PROLONGED GRIEF DISORDER

Fast Facts: Understanding Complicated Grief



# Understanding Complicated Grief

Complicated grief, also known as Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder, is a clinical condition where grief symptoms are prolonged, intense, and debilitating.

Source: Parisi A, Sharma A, Howard MO, Wilson AB. The relationship between substance misuse and complicated grief: A systematic review. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*. 2019 Aug 1;103:43-57.

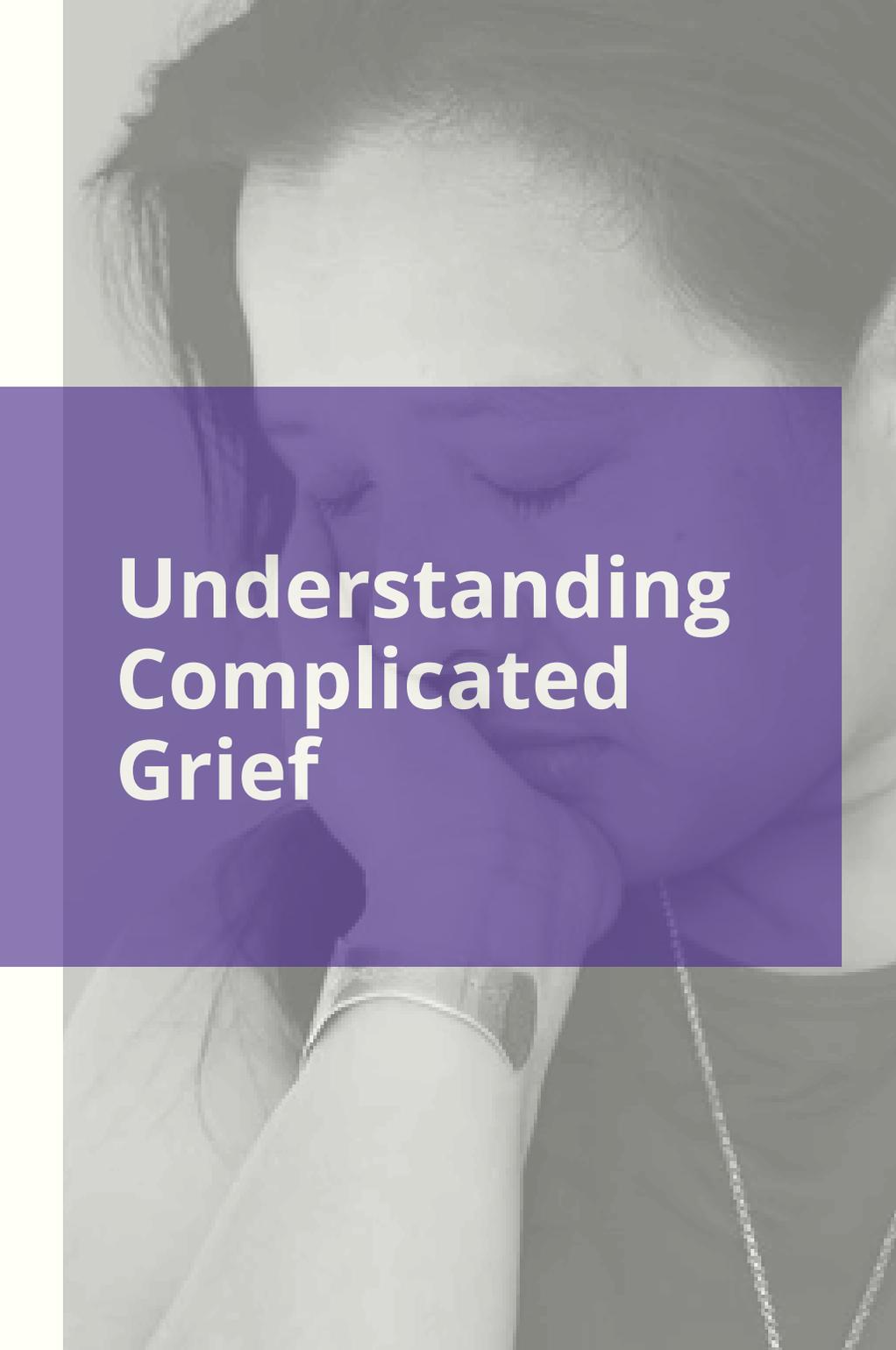


# Understanding Complicated Grief



## PREVALENCE

It affects approximately 10% of adults who have experienced a nonviolent death of a loved one.



# Understanding Complicated Grief

## KEY SYMPTOMS



Intense, clinically significant yearning for the deceased.

Difficulty accepting the reality of the loss.

Difficulty trusting others.

Emotional numbness, bitterness, or anger.

Feeling that life is meaningless.



# Understanding Complicated Grief

## HEALTH RISKS

Beyond mental distress, complicated grief is linked to physical issues like hypertension, sleep disruption, and a weakened immune system. It is also a strong predictor of suicidal behavior.



## **The Connection Between Grief and Substance Use**

Research shows that as grief worsens,  
substance use often does as well

## Increased Risk

Individuals with substance use disorders are at a significantly higher risk of developing complicated grief compared to those without substance use disorders.

## Directional Trends

Increases in substance use before a loss are associated with more severe, complicated grief symptoms later.

Existing complicated grief can predict future increases in substance use disorders.

# The Double Risk

Young adults who experience the impact of multiple deaths in a short period of time have nearly double the likelihood of developing a substance use disorder.





# Vulnerability and Risk Factors

Certain groups are more likely to experience both complicated grief and substance use simultaneously.

Source: Parisi A, Sharma A, Howard MO, Wilson AB. The relationship between substance misuse and complicated grief: A systematic review. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*. 2019 Aug 1;103:43-57.

A man with dreadlocks is sitting in a wheelchair. He is wearing a light-colored blazer over a white t-shirt. He is holding a sign that says "Looking for a job". The background is a solid purple color.

# Vulnerability and Risk Factors

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Factors like being female, experiencing unemployment, having a lower level of education, or having a history of incarceration increase the risk of both complicated grief and substance use.

A photograph of three young boys of diverse backgrounds looking towards the camera. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. The boy in the center is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt under a dark jacket. The boy on the left is wearing a dark sweater over a light shirt. The boy on the right is wearing a dark jacket over a light shirt.

# Vulnerability and Risk Factors

## TYPE OF LOSS

Experiencing the loss of a sibling or a parent (especially between ages 6–18) increases vulnerability to substance use and overdose.



# Vulnerability and Risk Factors

## NATURE OF DEATH

Traumatic circumstances, such as death by accident or suicide, significantly elevate the risk for both complicated grief and substance use.

# Vulnerability and Risk Factors

## **SOCIAL ISOLATION**

A lower level of perceived social support is a major predictor of poor mental health outcomes.

L O N E L Y

## PUBLIC HEALTH CONTEXT

Individuals in substance-using networks are more likely to experience frequent loss, putting them at constant risk for complicated grief.



## HOPE AND TREATMENT

While these conditions are serious, they can be treated effectively when addressed together.

**Simultaneous Treatment:** Evidence suggests that treating complicated grief and substance use disorder at the same time leads to better outcomes than treating them separately.



“



## Fast Facts: The Impact of Substance-Related Deaths on Families



## **ILLICIT DRUG USE**

Responsible for between 99,000 and 253,000 deaths annually.



## **REGIONAL IMPACT**

In North America, drug-related deaths account for approximately 1 in every 20 deaths among people aged 15 to 64.

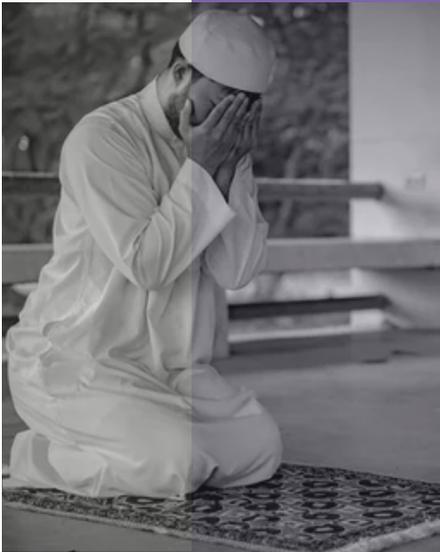
# Disenfranchised Grief and Stigma

## DISENFRACTISED GRIEF

Grief is "disenfranchised" when it is not publicly recognized or socially accepted.

## SOCIAL DISREGARD

Because these deaths are often viewed as "self-inflicted" or linked to "deviant" lifestyles, society may devalue the grief of the survivors.



# FAMILY DYNAMICS BEFORE LOSS

The period of bereavement that families experience from the death of a loved one due to substance misuse is often heavily shaped by the stress experienced before the death.



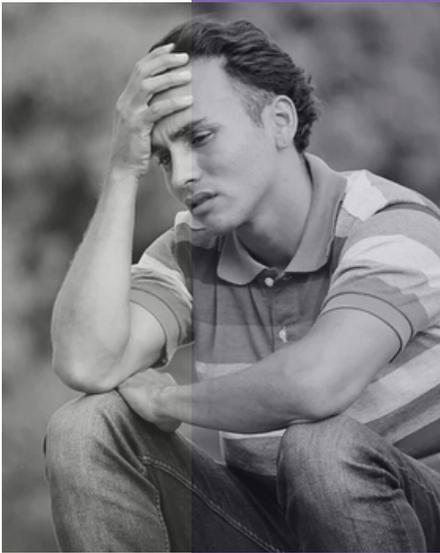
# FAMILY DYNAMICS BEFORE LOSS

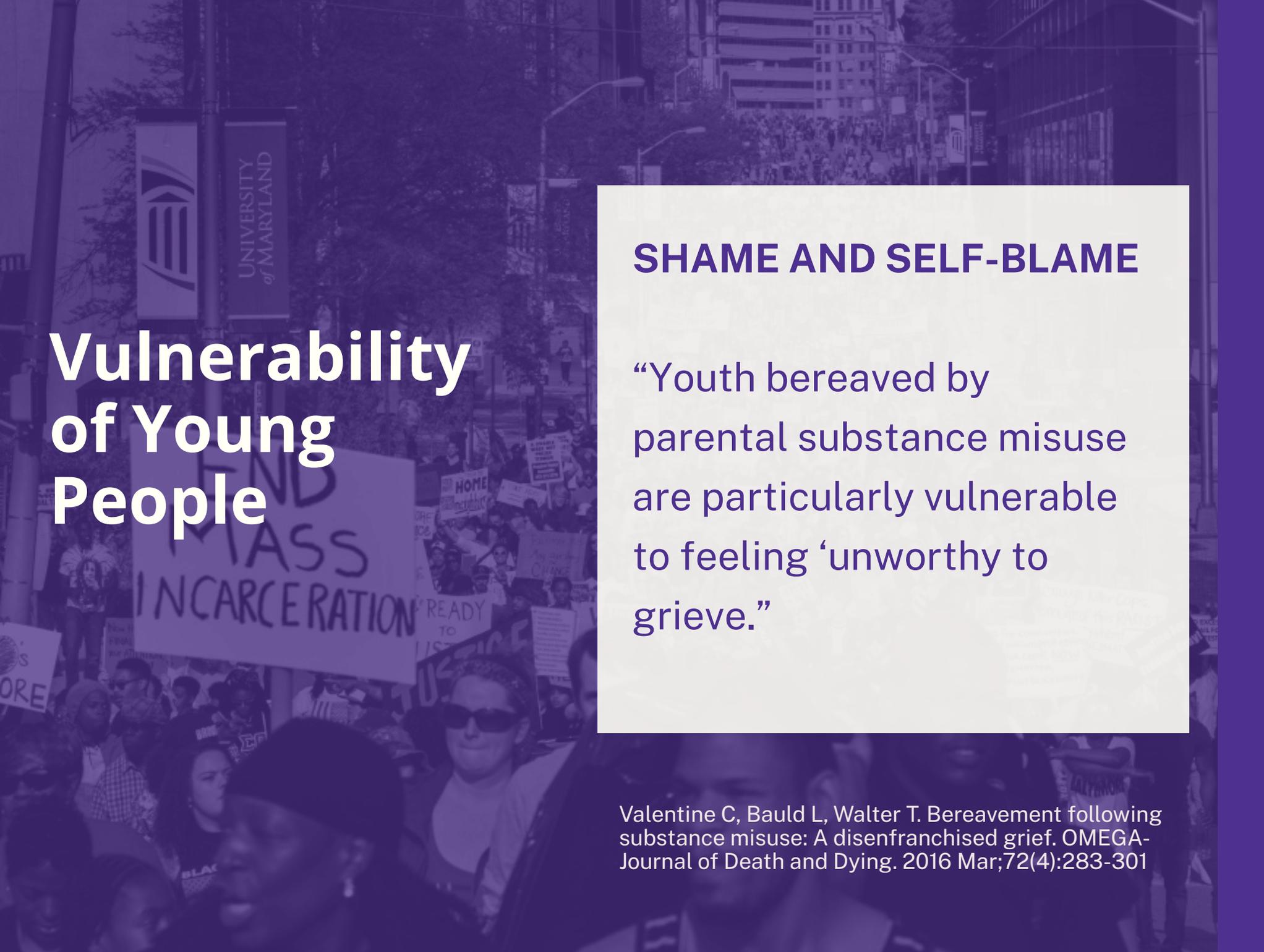
## "DOUBLE-DEATH"

Many families of individuals who misuse opioids experience a "prolonged grief" while the individual is still alive, feeling they have already "lost" the person they love to addiction.

## PARADOX OF HOPE

Deaths from substance use often occur during periods of abstinence (such as after prison release or rehab) when families finally feel hopeful for the future.





# Vulnerability of Young People

## SHAME AND SELF-BLAME

“Youth bereaved by parental substance misuse are particularly vulnerable to feeling ‘unworthy to grieve.’”

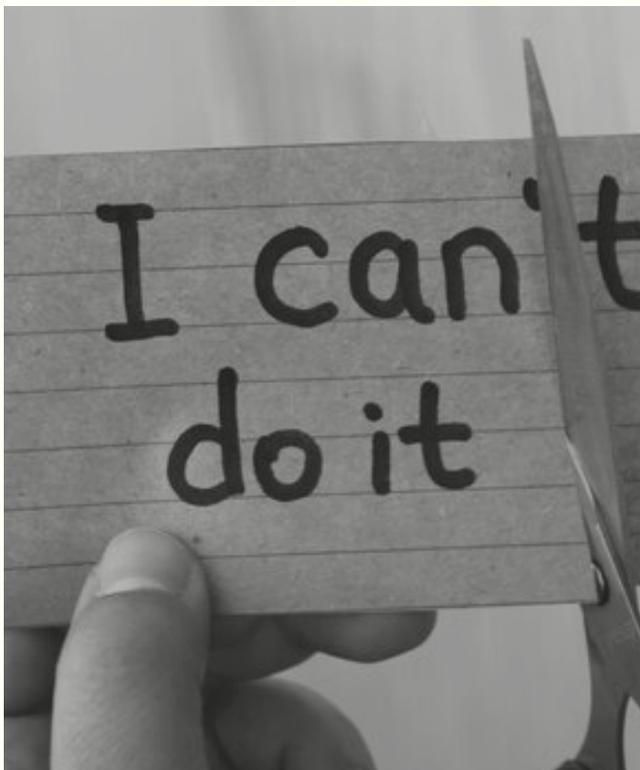
Valentine C, Bauld L, Walter T. Bereavement following substance misuse: A disenfranchised grief. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*. 2016 Mar;72(4):283-301



**HOPELine**  
*Healing + Outreach + Prevention & Education*

## HOPE & HEALING

Roberta's House HOPELine support groups and peer-led healing circles are designed to help individuals process loss in safe, compassionate spaces.



**HOPELine**  
*Healing + Outreach + Prevention & Education*

## HOPE & HEALING

We provide:

Naloxone (Narcan) kits

Fentanyl test strips

Safe use kits and  
overdose prevention  
tools

Training on how to  
recognize and respond  
to an overdose

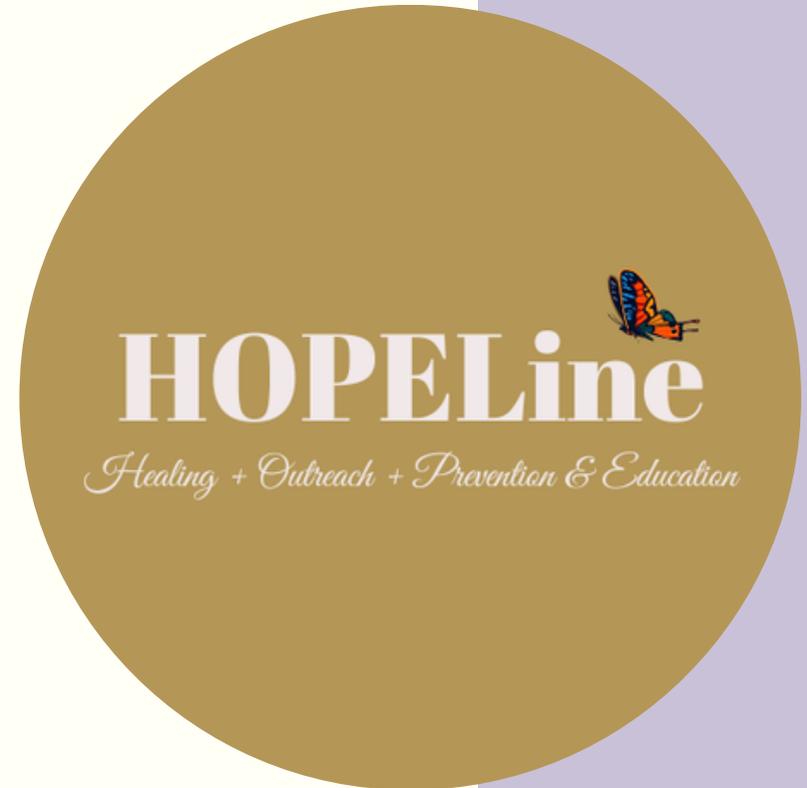
# Get Involved & Stay Connected

## WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Listen: Tune into ***Real Talk with Roberta's House*** for a special podcast series on grief and opioid misuse

Attend: Join one of our community trainings or listening sessions

Share: Help us reach more families —download our palm card and share on social media



# Hope and Help Are Available

**YOU ARE NOT ALONE**

*Roberta's House*

928 E North Avenue  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
**(410) 235-6633**

**Ask our front desk about grief support  
services or harm reduction resources  
today.**

