



Overdose Loss, Grief, and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

The following research encompasses the analysis of peer reviewed journal articles on complex grief and obtaining resilience after losing a loved one. It analyzes the effects of loss on mourners, the processing of grief, and evidence-based research on finding resilience. Overdose loss has underlying intricacies of stigma, shame, and blame which add to the normal stages of grief and complicate the process of healing.

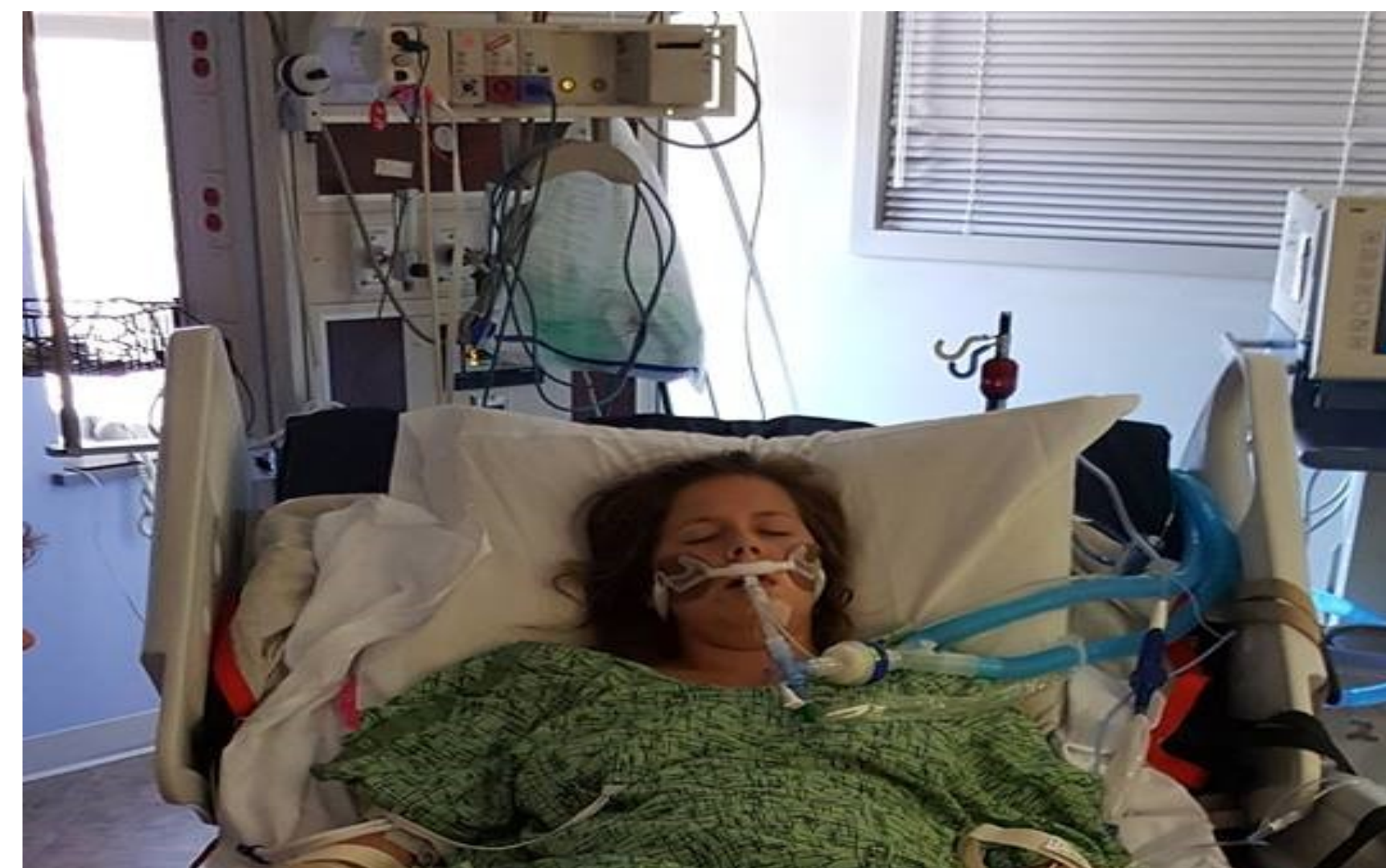
The purpose of this research is to facilitate a deeper understanding of complex grief after losing my daughter to an overdose, to find innovative ways to become resilient in the face of tragedy, and to share these findings with others to help them achieve resilience. Overdose loss brings mourners additional layers of Complex, Ambiguous, Unresolved, and Disenfranchised Grief and COVID has further increased isolation.

Due to a lack of resilience research for overdose specific grief, we analyzed scientifically proven, evidence-based research on ACES, Cancer, COVID, and Suicide which offer promising insight into overdose resilience. We found resilience to be promoted by strong support networks, bonding with other sufferers, and finding deeper meaning after loss. Collaborating with others who have lost someone helps to create unity and ease feelings of isolation.

The need for this study was highlighted by the fact there was little research into the complexities of overdose loss. This finding was corroborated by other researchers. More overdose specific grief and resilience research is urgently needed.

According to Clieren and others, the relationship with the deceased was the most important factor in determining the level of grief, with *mothers* suffering the greatest level of grief.

Families face ambiguous grief while watching helplessly as loved ones are slowly destroyed by the disease of addiction.



Toria Stevens (above) is in a coma after overdosing on opioids. She would overdose several more times before finally succumbing to a fatal overdose on January 22, 2018.

INTRODUCTION

Overdose does not discriminate; it can happen in any family. With the number of overdoses skyrocketing, it is important to look at the families who are affected. For every overdose death, there are a multitude of loved ones left behind. Their grief began long before the death occurred according to Antonovsky & Sourani in 1988. This theory recently resurfaced in research by Titlestad and others in studying Ambiguous Grief. The grief that starts when a loved one begins making poor choices which chip away at their opportunities, abilities, potential, and freedom. Experiencing loss while they are still alive, much like a terminally ill person who is slowly deteriorating. By understanding addiction is a disease as recently classified in the DSM-5, we can think of addiction more like cancer and therefore process the grief in more constructive ways. Thus, reframing has the potential to assist with the grieving process and assist in resilience.

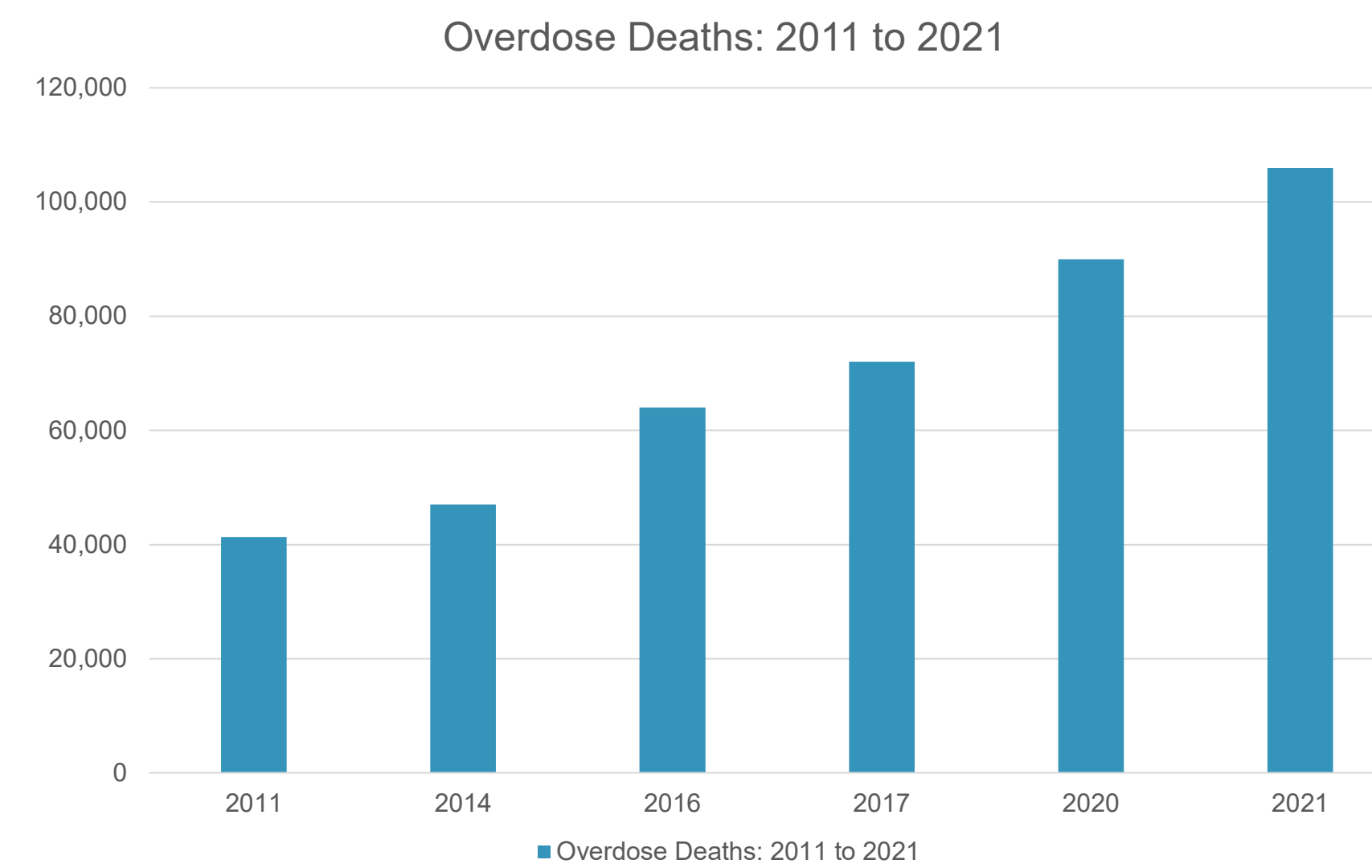
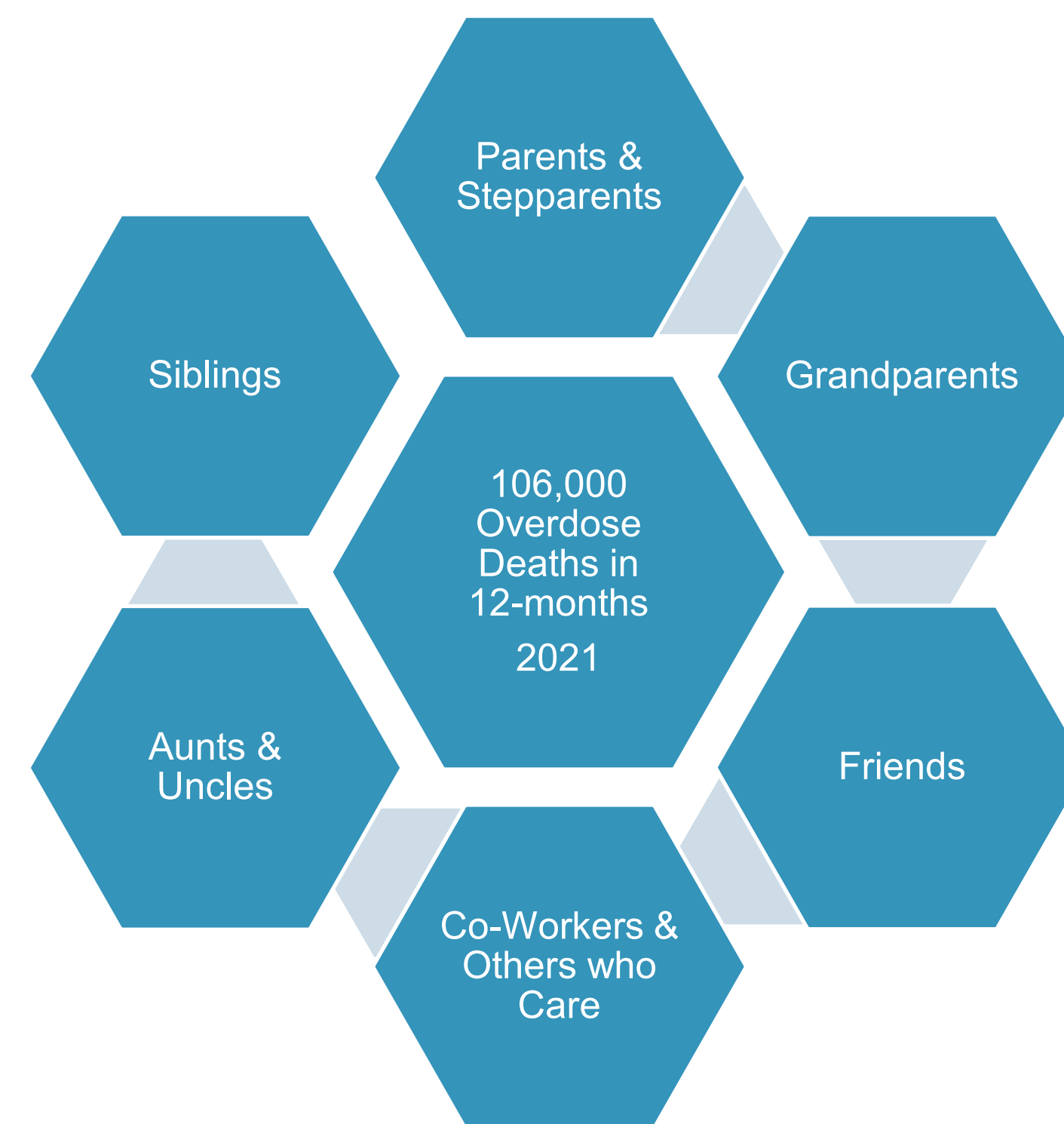


Chart 1: US Overdose Rates according to the CDC

Over 106,000 overdose deaths in a 12-month period ending in November 2021.

Pills and powders are the highest risk for overdose, as they are most likely to contain illicit fentanyl. Fake pills have inconsistent ingredients and can be pressed to replicate Xanax, Percocet, and Vicodin according to Friedman and his team of researchers.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Focusing on the past 10 years of data, overdose deaths have continued to rise. In 2011, the CDC reported that 41,340 people in the United States died of overdose. Last year, over 100,306 died in a 12-month period ending in April of 2021. The research focus based upon analyzing the data and research which has been compiled from peer-reviewed studies. Completing the research in 2021 while attending Wake Forest University, School of Medicine. The Addiction Research and Clinical Health program afforded the opportunity to additionally focus on Grief and Resilience. Homing in on the loved ones who are innocent casualties to the storm which rages in the brain of someone addicted.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Chandler in 2015 focuses on behaviors in coping with ACES and finding resilience. By reframing patterns of thought we can choose to "look on the bright side." He uses strategies of building strength, reframing resilience, and creating supportive connections to help cope with past trauma. Understanding that resilience is not essentially bouncing back. It is more of creating a new normal and learning how to package grief so that it does not negatively impact all areas of your life.

By highlighting the similarities between cancer and addiction, we can reduce stigma, and can "change the world by changing the language." Breast cancer survivors and their supporters rallied around the pink ribbon and changed the way people viewed it. We can do the same. Eli Saslow with the Washington Post, called the Teal Tear "The Pink Ribbon of Opioids." If we step out of the shadows, put faces with the numbers and promote awareness we can find unity, strength, and resilience.

The world stopped turning when the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, however instead of slowing the overdose rates the pandemic created more isolation, anxiety, and stress. It added fuel to the fire of an already out of control epidemic and created the perfect storm. The ripple effect of the increase in deaths was that loved ones were not allowed to hold funerals in many instances. This created a new problem, unfinished grieving.

Antonovsky & Sourani in 1988 concluded that resilience is strengthened when families "forge a sense of coherence through shared efforts to make loss-related challenges comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful," this should be true for the "overdose community at large."

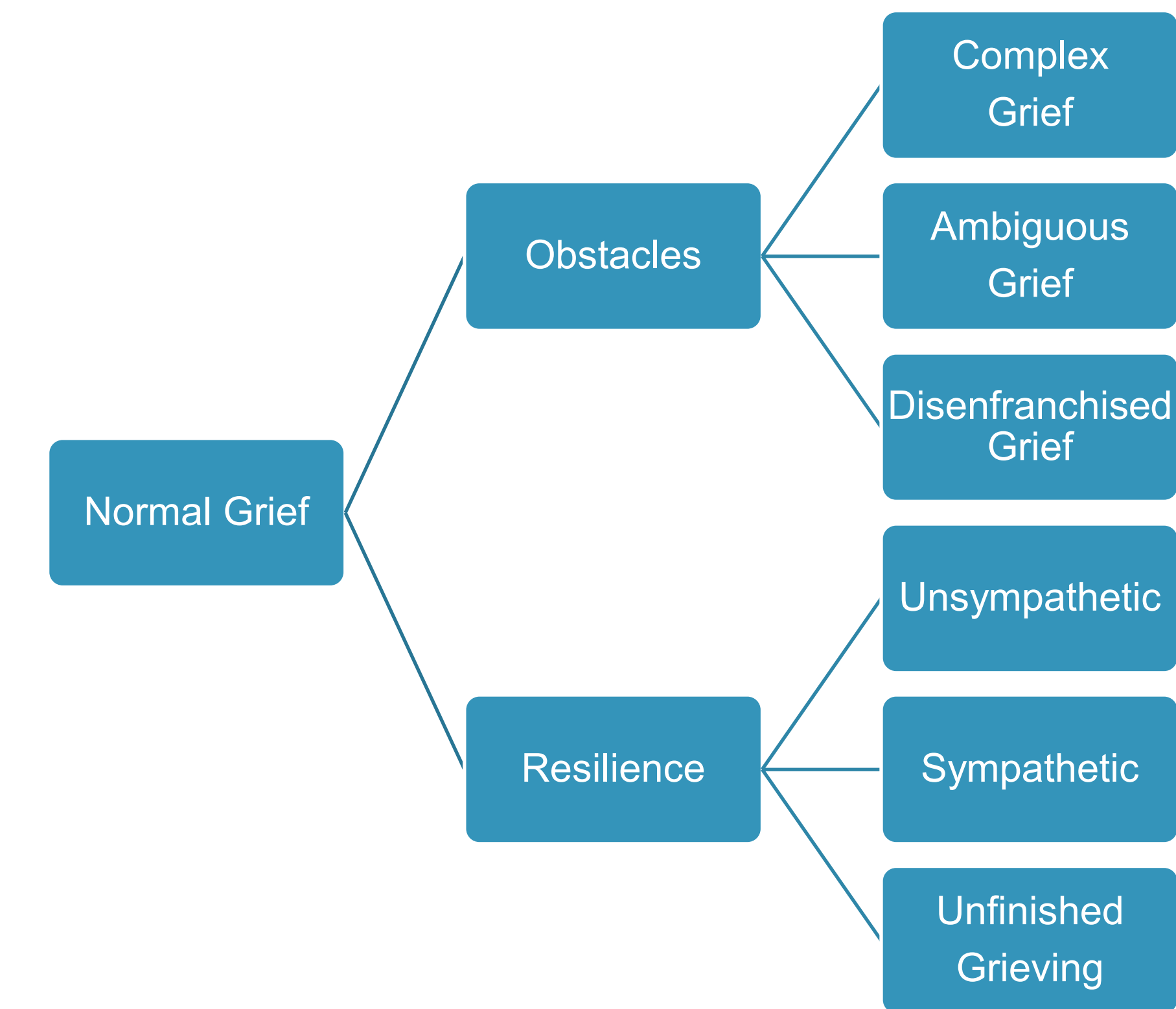
There is an abundance of research on grief from many angles, but there is a much-needed gap to be filled when it comes to Overdose Grief.

In 2010, Orford and others described a family member addiction as stressful, full of conflict and "oscillation between sacrificing one's own interests versus withdrawing from him or her."

REFERENCES



GRIEF & RESILIENCE RECAPPED



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Normal Grief

- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross
- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Complex Grief

- Overdose Loss
- Suicide Loss
- COVID Loss
- Social Stigma
- Moral Stigma
- Helplessness
- Guilt, Shame, Blame

Ambiguous Grief

- Grief Before Loss
- Traumatic Loss
- Immobilizes Family Processes
- Blocks Coping
- Blocks Decision Making
- Freezes Grief
- Ruptures Relationships

Disenfranchised Grief

- Not Worthy
- Not Acknowledged
- Judged
- Hide From Society
- Shame
- No Casseroles