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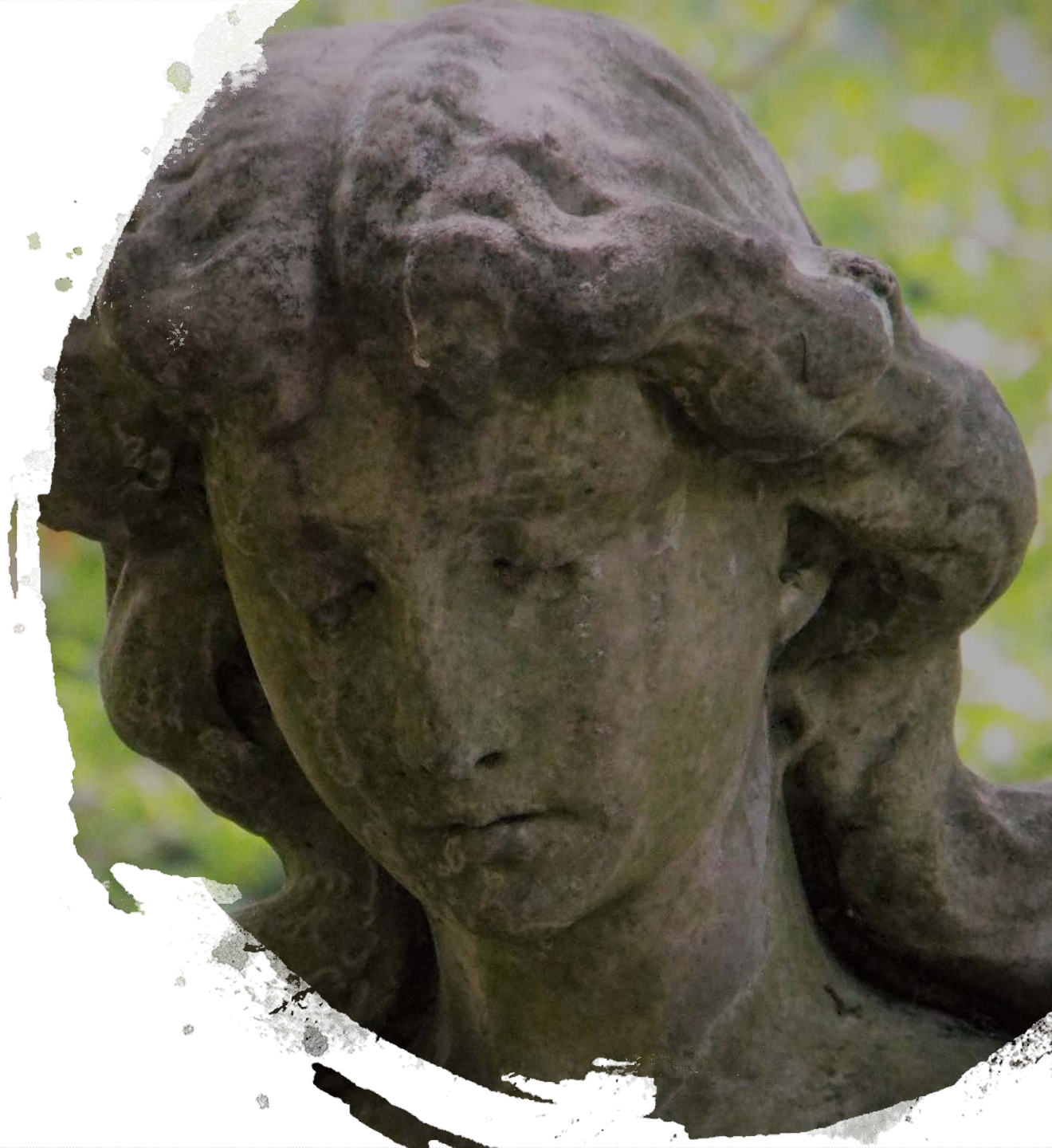
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Hidden Lives Hidden Losses

The bereavement experiences of Gypsies and Travellers

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Who we are shapes how we grieve

- It is arguable that many of the findings from this study are similar to those of other individuals, societies and cultures; this is particularly true of the rituals and behaviours associated with Catholicism. However, there are some culturally specific factors influencing the bereavement experiences of Gypsy and Traveller families, the most notable are:
- very close kinship relationships
- protective behaviours
- high multigenerational mortality rates

Gypsies and Travellers have:

- The poorest life chances of any ethnic group in the UK and 'face widespread discrimination' (Diacon 2007 :1)
- Significantly poorer' health than that of comparative ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged groups (Parry et al 2004)
- Life expectancy of 10yrs (men) 12yrs (women) less than sedentary population
- (Cemlyn et al 2009)

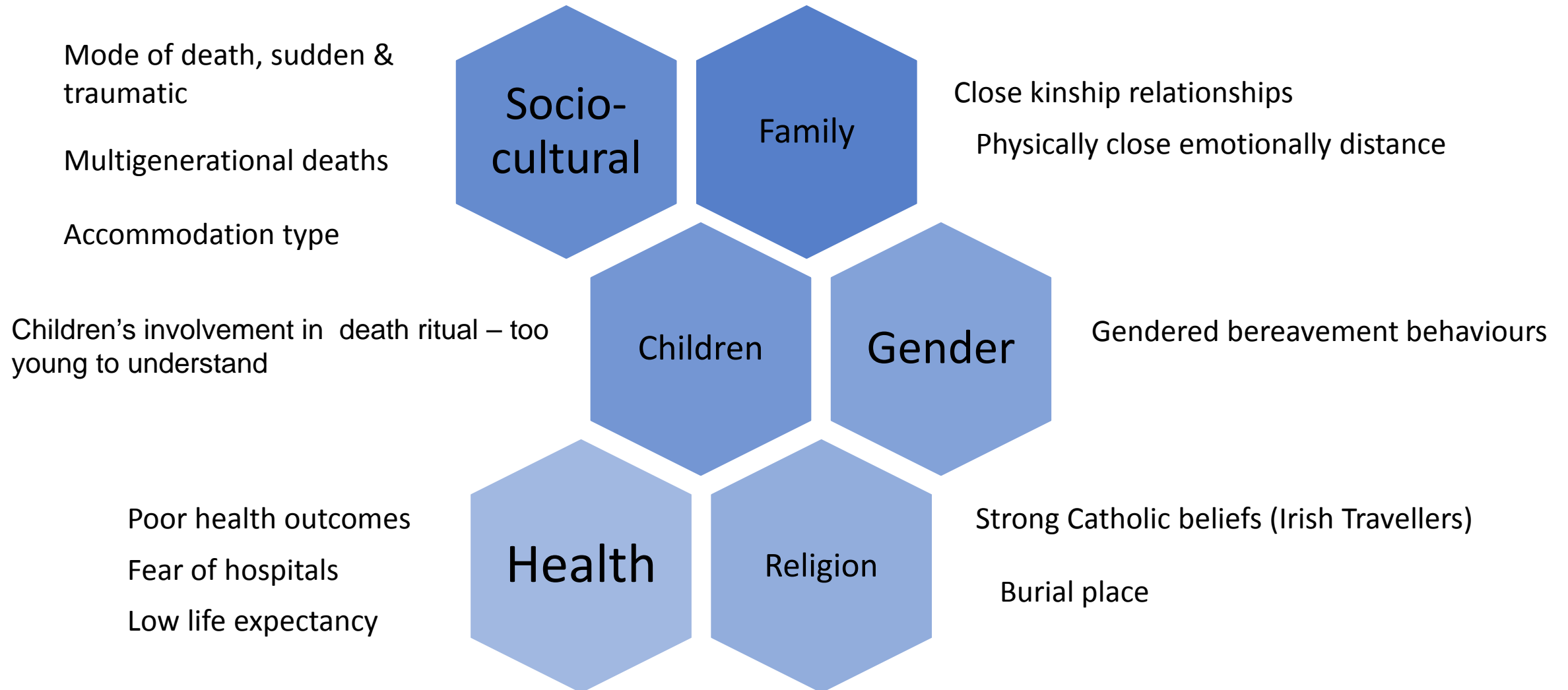




Cultural characteristics

- A stoic attitude and separateness of lifestyle means that an almost fatalist approach is taken with acceptance of high mortality rates as the norm. Therefore there is an expectation of loss, particularly evident in the high maternal mortality rates where the loss of more than one child is common.
- This stoic approach impacts on children as they are involved in funeral rites but lack explanation and emotional support, whilst the adults stance is that they are too young to understand, children's experiences suggest otherwise.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests long term impact on resilience and mental health, exacerbating grief as adults and perpetuating Intergenerational problems.
- Grief is exacerbated by the nature of Gypsies and Travellers being '**very private people**' and the strong moral codes that govern behavioural mores. These constrain the open expression of grief resulting in the long term complicated grief patterns found in this study.

Factors affecting bereavement experiences:





Bereavement experiences

- Respondents frequently cite entwined multiple death narratives often sudden and traumatic including road traffic accidents , suicide, bereavement suicide and intergenerational loss.
- High levels of miscarriage and stillbirth
- 66% of participants experienced loss of a child

“Tragic, no one questioned the loss, the amount of children, we didn’t realise how many more Traveller children died”

- High levels of suicide, particularly in young males.
- Male bereavement suicide also significant.



This family
experienced 5
bereavements
in 18 months

- My brother, he could not cope with it and he got himself arrested he Just couldn't cope To get yourself locked up to go out stealing and get locked up so you don't have to face the reality of what's going on , isn't that enough to say? He deliberately went out and got himself locked up so he didn't have to cope with it. I suppose that's an example of what men will do.
(Respondent talking about one brother's reaction to another brother's suicide)



Baby loss

- “Years later I started to realise the impact on my family, my mother, grandmother and aunt. The subject had been avoided for years. After my gran died my aunt, she’s autistic, told me how upset my gran had been, she grieved to loss of her grandchild but never said anything to protect me. My sister married but didn’t have children for ten years, she was afraid that it would upset me if she had a child and also afraid that she would lose her child, she was young , only twelve when I lost my baby and we never spoke about it so she didn’t understand. Travellers are quite stoical I think. It was a revelation to me that other people grieved my loss”.

Contradictory bereavement behaviours:

Overt expressions of loss with large and lavish funerals and complex death rituals.

'The grave, its an extension of your love for that person, you know their not there, it's a piece of ground, but it is symbolic'

In contrast individual grief remains hidden often for many years.

'If we don't talk about it, we won't hurt anyone's feelings and the more you keep it inside the worse it is getting,





Marginal place and marginal space

- Gypsies and Travellers continue to live on the margins of society their burial place can also be a marginal space, often the edge of cemeteries.
- Miscarriage difficult as no burial place, recognition or marker for loss - *'no where to go'*
- Close family and kin relationships in life continue in burial plots which are often family plots -
- *"We all have our plots and my little niece (6yrs old) she's picked hers out, she says she wants to be next to me nanny"*



Move on but
don't let go...

- The traditionally nomadic lifestyle means that physically their deceased family members are left behind as they move from place to place, but the dead maintain a strong emotional space and continuing bond within the lives of the living.
- Challenges between mobility and settled lifestyles
- Mobility & transnational burial places - many Irish Travellers return to Ireland
- Place of death primary marker for identity, hence Irish Travellers often return to Ireland
- *“none of us live as close to each other as we used to”*



The final resting place...

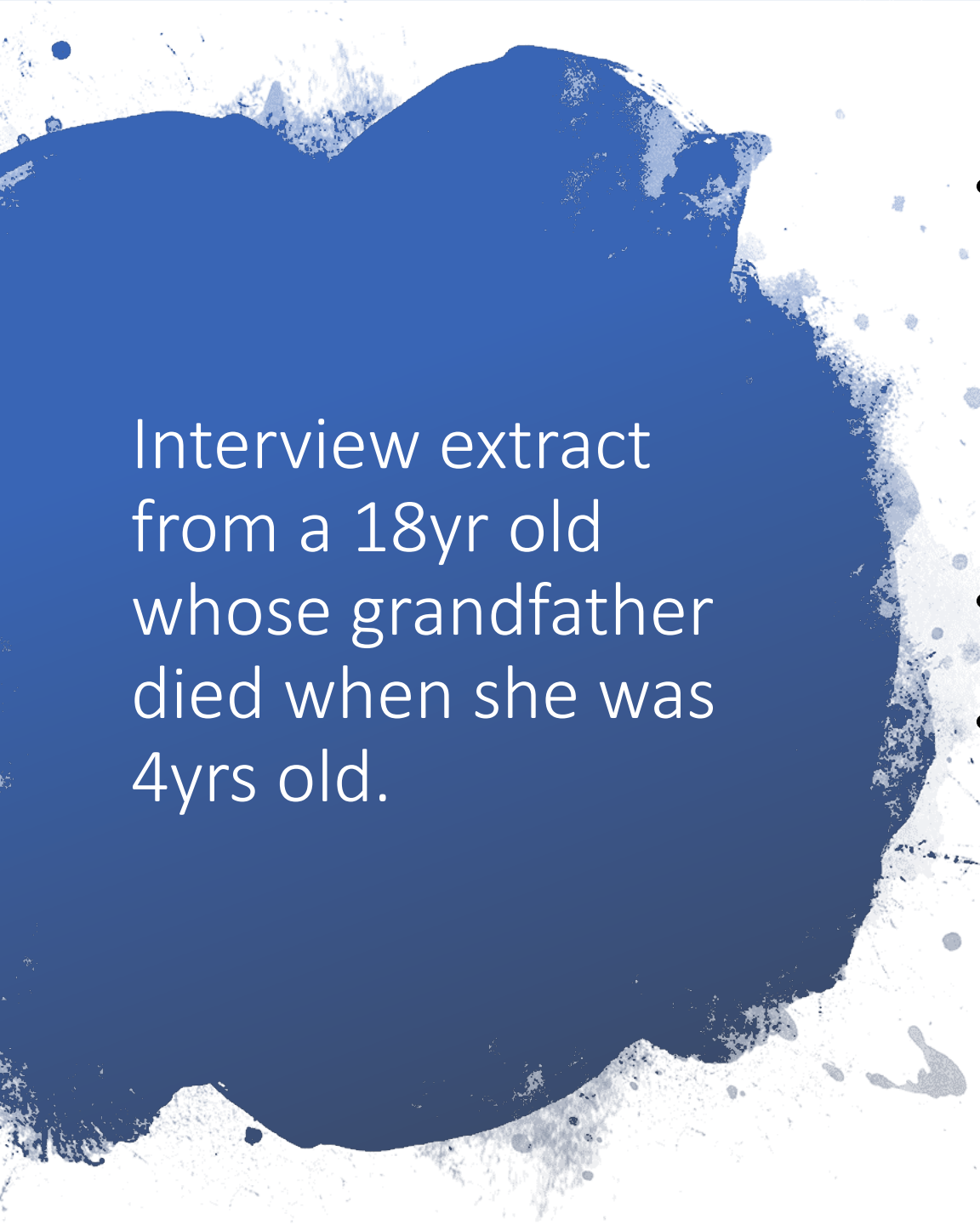
- “ the most important thing for families is where you bury them, you like to think of where they are going, are they going to be with someone they know, it’s a big thing.
- The grave, its an extension of your love for that person, you know their not there, it’s a piece of ground, but it is symbolic.
- *“ They are in your arms, they live on”*



What about the children?



- *'the children are involved when someone dies, they go to see them with us, we go to the funeral parlour, to the masses, light the candles, have them at the funeral so initially they wear the hat of what is going on but we don't explain anything to them. They see it all the time and I suppose it is going to affect the child emotionally but I've heard the old people saying:
'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'*



Interview extract
from a 18yr old
whose grandfather
died when she was
4yrs old.

- 'When my grandfather died we sat up for 2 weeks non stop, never slept, never did anything. It was the hardest thing to do. When I look back it was terrible, knowing that your grandfather was dead inside that room. Even now when I go up to the trailer it is hardest thing cos all you can think is that I can smell it. Ever since I was a little girl dead people smell. It comes back to you'.- younger Gypsy relating long term impact of this experience
- 'And the coldness when you kiss them goodbye they are so cold and you don't forget that cold feeling'.
- 'And that one bit of taste in your mouth. When I was a little girl I always helped my mum. After my grandfather died I haven't been to another funeral and I wouldn't go. Its too much pain. When you've experienced the pain you have that fear that you are going to receive that exact pain again.'

Children's views

Having someone to talk to

remembering, ~~the~~ having
a friend and remembering
good things about
the person who has
died.



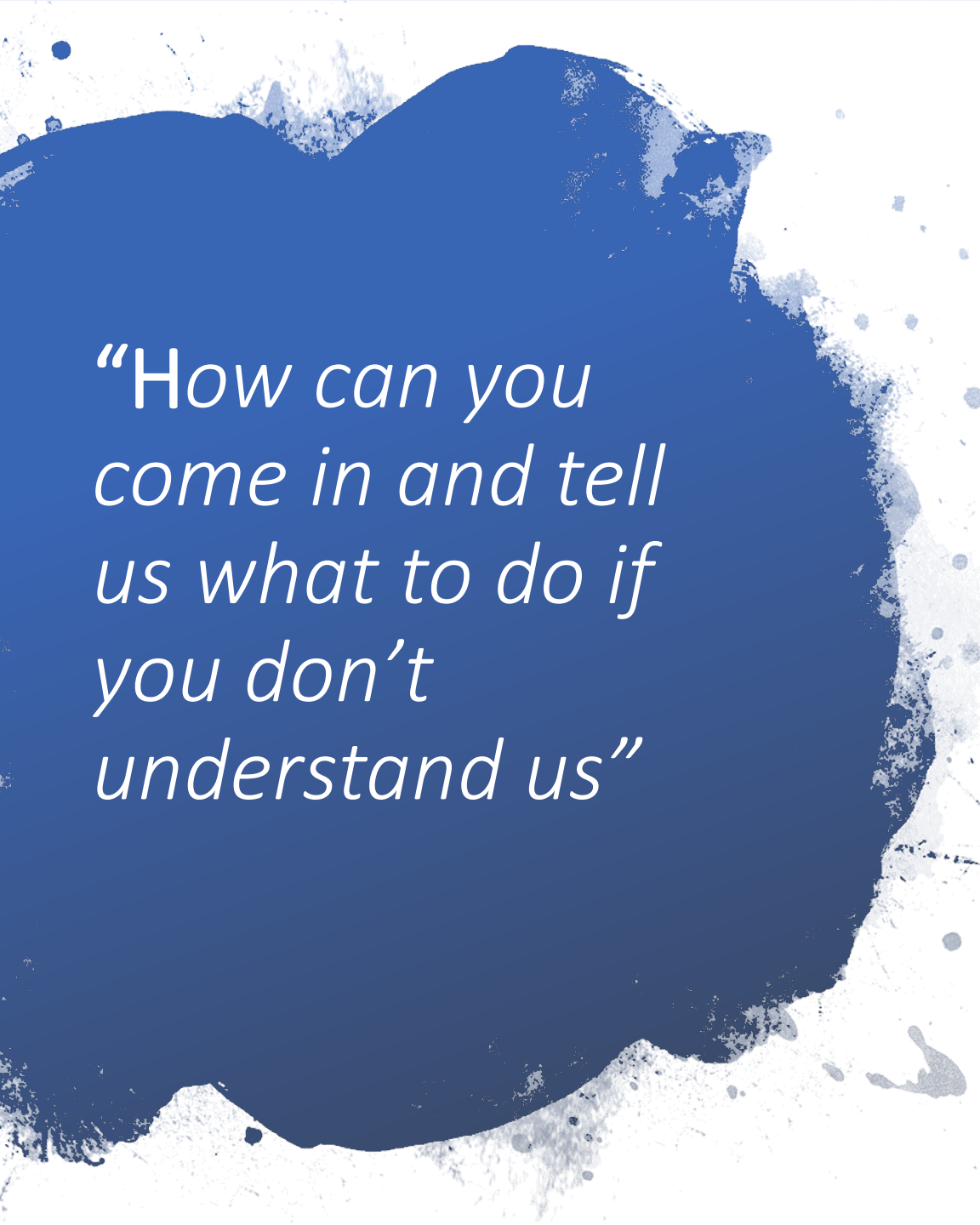
Family benefit or barrier ?

- Positive resilience factors are clearly identifiable in the traditional family structures, secure emotional attachments, strong relationships and emotional support. However the overriding cultural need to 'protect family at all costs' appears to be detrimental to individual emotional resilience.
- *'I think being the grandchild when my grandmother died, all you want to do is look after your mother, but being the head of the family, they don't want your help, they are trying to protect you so its like a vicious circle, you are looking out for them and they for you all at the same time.'*
- *'If it's a member of your own family, your brother or sister, you can't show your feelings you can't because you are afraid to hurt them, you have to keep a brave face on it'.*



Protective behaviours

- “We do expect a lot of ourselves we have to cope with everything, to carry on with family life; you almost haven’t got time to grieve... If it’s a member of your own family, your brother or sister, you can’t show your feelings you can’t because you are afraid to hurt them, you have to keep a brave face on it”.
- “You can’t show your feelings...its part of a Traveller, it’s what they do, and unfortunately that brings a lot of problems. I think that could be the cause of a lot of suicide as well when nobody is getting to say what they feel, and kept it to themselves and that’s why you get a suicide that follows a death”.
- “You’ve got this overwhelming feeling that you don’t know what to do with, it’s there for years biting at you”.



*“How can you
come in and tell
us what to do if
you don’t
understand us”*

- *Travellers are very private people, very secretive people and the reason why they are very private and secretive is because there is an awful lot of mistrust out there because to be honest Travellers have been pulled from pillar to post all their whole life there’s barriers that still need to be broken down for Traveller’s and it’s not easy for Travellers to express themselves because they like to convince the world that they are independent people. I think they are very very, blind to see they do need counselling, everyone that is bereaved needs counselling at some time in their lives but they are just a bit naive to see that, they say to themselves we are Travellers we don’t do that but what Travellers have to realise it’s that yes they do need to do that.*

Conclusion

- The challenges and complexities of Gypsy and Traveller culture means that they live with high levels of risk and vulnerability when compared to majority cultures.
- The strong family attachments that should provide the balance in their lives, and which in many ways help them to develop resilience to the hardships of life are important supporting them through physical struggles, resilience in the face of bereavement (something which is difficult for anyone to cope with) appears to be compromised by the overriding need to protect other family members by asserting stoicism and in doing so, risk ignoring the cost of individual emotional health and wellbeing with intergenerational impacts.

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