Ambiguous Loss and Frozen Sorrow
Lana Kim McGeary, MA and Suzanne O’ Brien, MA
Faculty/Presenter Disclosure

Presenter Name: Lana Kim McGeary, MA and Suzanne O’Brien, MA

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Pauline Boss originated the term ambiguous loss. The contents herein are in large part based on her presentations and work.

- **Loss, Trauma, and Resilience**, WW Norton, 2006
- **Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief**, Harvard University Press, 2000
- [www.ambiguousloss.com](http://www.ambiguousloss.com)
Part 1
- Definitions and theory
- Experiential scenarios
- Break

Part 2
- Cultural variations
- Ritual and ceremony
- Creative brainstorming
- Take away and questions
• Ambiguous loss is a relational phenomenon; it ruptures human relationships.
• Intervention is based on stress/resiliency model, not medical model.
• Ambiguity complicates loss, grief and coping processes.
• The grief is ongoing - no closure.
• A psychological family can exist in one’s mind.
• Professional tolerance for the stress of ambiguity is essential.
AMBIGUOUS LOSS IS

• A loss that is unclear and without closure
• A situation or problem without answers and/or resolution

Often involves:
- a mixture of absence and presence
- a lack of certainty, relationship boundaries are ambiguous
Physical absence with psychological presence

- Missing/ disappeared
- Kidnapped
- Separated/ divorced
- Military deployment
- Incarceration
Psychological absence with physical presence

- Addiction
- Dementia
- Chronic mental illness
- Depression
- Brain injury/coma
1. Immobilizes individuals and relationships
2. Confuses decision making processes
3. Freezes the grief process
4. Blocks coping processes
5. Leads to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, exhaustion
DIFFERENCES

• Difference b/w Ambiguous Loss and trauma, PTSD, complicated grief.

• Difference b/w Ambiguous Loss and ordinary loss from death
SPECIFICS TO AMBIGUOUS LOSS

• No official verification of loss, no proof of death.
• Possibility of disenfranchised and/or complicated grief.
• Grief occurs before death so people feel guilty and confused.
• Grief is ongoing; no possibility of resolution or closure.
• Symptoms of complex grief result from the social context, not personal pathology.
WHAT IS LOST?

• Loss of loved one as they were—and thus loss of the relationship as it was.
• Loss of knowing whereabouts of loved one or status as dead or alive; no body to bury.
• Loss of control over my life (on edge, not knowing, in limbo, frozen in place).
• Loss of trust in the world as a fair and rational place.
• Loss of dreams for the future.
POSSIBLE MANIFESTATIONS

• Anxiety
• Sense of hopelessness and helplessness
• Identity confusion (Who am I now?)
• Increased ambivalence: social, not psychiatric
• Anxious attachment and insecurity
• Frozen grief (sadness vs. depression)
SADNESS VS. DEPRESSION

• Sadness: mildly grieving and unhappy, but still functioning; oscillation.
  Intervention: human connection, peer groups, social support and activities.

• Depression: sadness so deep one cannot function; cannot care for self or others.
  Intervention: professional psychotherapy, family therapy, perhaps medication.
Therapeutic Goals

Intent is to build resilience/ coping

1) Finding Meaning
2) Adjusting Mastery
3) Reconstructing Identity
4) Normalizing Ambivalence
5) Revising Attachment
6) Discovering New Hope
1. Finding Meaning

Make Sense of Loss

What Helps? Giving the problem a name: i.e., “ambiguous loss;” talking with peers; using both-and thinking; increasing one’s tolerance for ambiguity; continuing but adapting family rituals and celebrations.

Happy Birthday
Sue
love MUM xx
Both-And (dialectical) thinking

- My parent is both gone—and here in my heart and mind.
- She may come back—and maybe not.
- I am both sad about the physical absence of my parent—and finding new parental figures and social support.
- Other
2. Adjusting Mastery

Modify the Desire for Control and Certainty

- **What Helps?** Knowing that the world is not always fair, decreasing self blame, externalizing blame, mastering one’s internal self (meditation, prayer, mindfulness, yoga, exercise, music, art, improv, etc.).

- **What Hinders?** Believing that *you* have failed.
3. Reconstructing Identity

How to Know Who You Are Now

- **What Helps?** Finding supportive family members, relatives—or a “psychological” family; redefining family boundaries: who’s in, who’s out, who plays what roles now, who you are now?

- **What Hinders?** Not wanting to change who you are or what you do.
Me vs. Them

Jayda K
A year and a half

Jayda K
Ghosts (all the bits I lost)

Jayda K
Pain Monsters

Jayda K
4. Normalizing Ambivalence

How to Manage Anxiety From Mixed Emotions

- **What Helps?** Acknowledge its existence. Normalizing guilt, anger and other negative feelings about your loved one; seeing conflicted feelings as normal; talking about them with peers, social worker, other professionals; reassigning roles and responsibilities.

- **What Hinders?** Denying or keeping secret that you sometimes “wish it were over.”
How Can You Let Go Without Certainty of Loss?

• **What Helps?** Recognizing that your loved one is both here and gone (grieving what you have lost, acknowledging/celebrating what you still have); finding a new way to be family; finding new mentors.

• **What Hinders?** Holding on without also developing new attachments.
6. Discovering New Hope

Finding new hope when loss remains ambiguous

- **What Helps?** Becoming more comfortable with ambiguity (a kind of spirituality), laughing at absurdity, redefining justice, finding something you can control or master to balance the ambiguity, finding forgiveness.

- **What Hinders?** Isolation, self blame, social stigma, social policies.
• What ambiguous loss have I experienced?
• What type? Physical? Psychological? Both?
• What did it mean to me then?
• What does it mean to me now?
• Who is my psychological family?
We cannot know what we do not know.
• One story changed researcher and research
• Questions about ethnocentricity
• Ojibway, Cree and Anishinabe coping
CULTURAL VARIANCES

• Different definitions of family
• Access to fluid ceremonial practices
• View of human process: cooked or raw
• Worldviews that allow for chaos and change
• Emotional expression, learning and knowledge acquisition
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I step into the day;
I step into myself;
I step into the mystery.
RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY?

Religion (*Religare/to bind fast*) = public practices
- membership - institution
- rituals
- sacred texts
- traditions

Spiritual = personal realm of experiences, beliefs and values

Religion is organized spirituality (Huston Smith, 2002)
RITUAL AND CEREMONY

Ritual crystalizes our deepest sensitivities for living
Individual and family resilience is the ability to withstand stress. To bounce back and grow stronger because of it.

Strength forged through adversity.

With ambiguous loss: Resilience is tolerance for ambiguity.
Resilience is more than recovery.

Resilience is more common than we thought.

There are often uncommon pathways to resilience: e.g., family, community, culture, spiritual beliefs, etc.
1) Finding Meaning
2) Adjusting Mastery
3) Reconstructing Identity
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6) Discovering New Hope
RITUAL AND CEREMONY

• Motivate and move us
• Help strengthen and reweave family and community ties and bonds
• Allow ‘safe’ expression of emotion (they contain and receive)
• Renew and sustain identities
CEREMONY - HABIT

• Mindful acts that are carried out for specific reason
• Imbued with intention (conscious or unconscious)
• Adapt and re-evaluate
• Experiential and emotional
• Relaying of social mores
• Loss of belonging
• Before and after, individual is changed
• What family or community celebrations, holiday events and rituals did you celebrate before the AL occurred?
• How did you and your family adapt these to fit the circumstances?
• Was community part of this?
1) How do you use and experience rituals and ceremonies in your personal and professional life?

2) How might you use the "frame" of ritual and/or ceremony to increase the power of your life (and loss) experiences. Consider how you might change your use of ritual and ceremony?

3) Did you learn something new about how you "do" your life?
CREATIVE BRAINSTORMING
• AL = no perfect fix. Think both-and, recognize paradox, build resilience to live with ambiguity and unanswered questions.
• There is more than one way to be family.
• Ritual and ceremony help hold ambiguity.
TAKE AWAY

• Ambiguous Loss is a traumatic on-going loss and thus has no closure.
• Irresolvable loss may produce symptoms similar to complicated or frozen grief.
• AL is a relational condition and requires relational interventions.
• Cultures with stronger relational worldviews may be less vulnerable to this.
• Ritual and Celebration practices may strengthen relational ties.
Self Care for Professionals

• Living with ambiguity is difficult for those trained to solve problems and fix.

• We cannot bring families and individuals farther than we ourselves can go in tolerating ambiguity.

• Increasing our own comfort with ambiguity requires both-and thinking.
RESOURCES


www.ambiguousloss.com
THANK YOU