

# Ambiguous Loss: A Different Kind of Grief



The term Ambiguous Loss was first conceived by educator and researcher, Dr. Pauline Boss, in the 1970's. Ambiguous loss is recognized as one of the most stressful kinds of loss that individuals experience yet it often goes unrecognized. Loss in general can be especially difficult for children and adolescents to process, but when it becomes complicated with uncertainty, finding understanding can become emotionally taxing.

In death, there is finality in that our loved one is both physically and psychologically absent. Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs without closure because it is not clear-cut or final. There are two types of ambiguous loss. The first occurs when a person is physically present but psychologically absent. For example, a family member who has a brain injury, Alzheimer's or a severe mental illness or addiction. This type of loss can also occur in cases of neglect. The second type of ambiguous loss occurs when a person is physically absent but emotionally or psychologically present. Examples of this type of ambiguous loss include immigration, adoption, foster care abandonment or a family member who is incarcerated or serving in the military. It is common for both types of ambiguous loss to overlap.

According to Dr. Boss, ambiguous loss is a "relational disorder caused by the lack of facts surrounding the loss of a loved one." This type of loss occurs with a mixture of absence and presence and can be traumatic in its experience because of pain, confusion and distress. Responses to ambiguous loss may include:

- Strong feelings that range from confusion to anger and sadness, sometimes with no conscious awareness of why these feelings exist
- Academic struggles
- A sense of hopelessness
- Blocked coping and difficulty problem solving due to uncertainty if loss is final or temporary
- Difficulty with transitions and changes
- Symptoms of anxiety and depression
- Great overlap with PTSD

Much of the research on ambiguous loss suggests that family and community-based interventions are most effective in helping children and adolescents process their feelings. First and foremost, the loss must be recognized by adults and caregivers in that child's life. Youth need their experiences to be acknowledged and they need guidance in finding a way to understand the emotions they are feeling. Secondly, Dr. Boss recommends assessing the effects on the family system as a result of the ambiguous loss. The following questions can serve as a guide:

- Are family roles changed or confused?
- Is there family conflict or alienation?
- Is safety or financial security an issue?
- Have family rituals or celebrations been changed or cancelled?

With ambiguous loss, closure may not be possible, so learning to cope and live with the ambiguity through resiliency becomes the goal. As a means to this end, Dr. Boss developed the following 6 guidelines for living with ambiguous loss:

1. Finding Meaning: Making sense of the loss (naming the problem, talking with peers, forgiveness, continuing but changing family rituals and celebrations.)
2. Adjusting Mastery: Modifying the desire for control and certainty (recognizing the world is not always fair, managing and making decisions, mastering one's internal self through mindfulness, exercise, music, etc.)
3. Reconstructing Identity: Knowing who you are now (finding supporting family or other "family" members, redefining family boundaries, being flexible about family roles, identifying who is in/out of family system)
4. Normalizing Ambivalence: Managing the anxiety from mixed emotions (seeing conflicted feelings as normal, talking about them with a professional)
5. Revising Attachment: Letting go without certainty of loss (recognizing that a loved one is both here and gone by grieving what has been lost and acknowledging/celebrating what you still have, finding new human connections)
6. Discovering New Hope: Finding new hope when your loss remains ambiguous (imagine a new way of being, imagining new future plans or dreams, spirituality, encouragement through family and friends)

Children and adolescents can heal and move forward from ambiguous loss. Support, affirmation and compassion from caring adults can help guide the process of resiliency.

References: American Psychological Association; Boss, Pauline. *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*; Boss, Pauline. *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with ambiguous Loss*.