

Myth of Closure: What is Normal Grief after Loss, Clear or Ambiguous?

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Pauline Boss, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor, University of
Minnesota
ambiguousloss.com



Introduction: The Problem and the Goal

- The stressor: a loss that has no closure or ending.
- The goal: resiliency to live with the stressor long term as there may be no solution.



Assumptions

- Ambiguous loss is a relational phenomenon; it ruptures human relationships.
- A psychological family exists in one's mind.
- Ambiguity complicates loss and thus complicates grief and coping processes.
- The grief is ongoing so there is no closure.
- Intervention is based on stress/resiliency model, not medical model.
- Professional tolerance for the stress of ambiguity is essential.



Research Update on Grief & Loss

History

A. Focus on Finishing the Work of Grieving

- Grief as Repressed or Delayed (Lindemann, 1944)
- Grief in Five Stages (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
(denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance)

B. Focus on More Nuanced Types of Grief

- Disenfranchised Grief (Doka, 1989)
- Chronic Sorrow (Harris, 2010; Olshansky, 1962; Roos, 2002)
- Grief as Oscillation (Bonanno, 2009; Kissane, 2003, 2011)



Research Update on Grief & Loss (cont.)

C. Focus on Living With Grief; No Need to Get Over It

- Becvar, 2001
- Boss & Greenberg, 1984
- Boss, 2006-2011
- Boss & Carnes, 2012
- Neimeyer, Harris, Winokuer, & Thornton, 2011
- Kissane, 2011

D. Focus on Types of LOSS

- Ambiguous Loss (Boss 1999, 2006, 2011, 2012a)
- Traumatic Loss (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996/2007)
- PTSD (Figley, 1985)



Research Update on Grief & Loss (cont.)

E. Focus on Resilience Instead of Closure

- Becvar, 2001
- Boss, 2006; 2012b
- Hawley and DeHaan, 1996
- Masten, 2001
- McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993
- Walsh, 1998



Research Update on Grief & Loss (cont.)

F. Focus on Family/Community Interventions After Loss

- Boss, 1988/2002, 1999, 2006
- Boss, Beaulieu, Wieling, Turner, & LaCruz, 2003
- Kissane, 2003, 2011, in press
- Landau, 2007
- Robins, 2013
- Saul, 2013



What is Ambiguous Loss?

- A loss that remains unclear and thus has no closure.
- A loss that has no official verification; can't be clarified, cured, or fixed.
- The loss can be physical or psychological but with incongruence between absence/presence.
- The pathology lies in the external context of ambiguity, not in the individual or family.



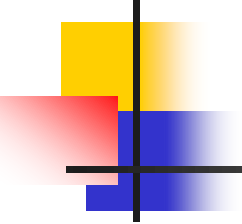
Two Types of Ambiguous Loss

- Type I: Physical absence with psychological presence (e.g., kidnapped, missing, disappeared, lost without a trace, family member living elsewhere--college, institutional care, military, immigration, incarceration, expats, adoption, foster care, divorce, desertion.)
- Type II: Psychological absence with physical presence (e.g., dementia, depression, addiction, preoccupation with lost person, chronic mental illness, autism, homesickness, obsessions with games, Internet, addictions, etc.)
(See Appendix A & Appendix B.)



Other Descriptions of AL

- Physical ambiguous loss is:
“Leaving without goodbye.”
“Gone, but not for sure.”
- Psychological ambiguous loss is:
“Goodbye without leaving.”
“Here, but not here.”

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- Ambiguous loss is inherently a complicated loss. Through no fault of the individual, couple, or family, it leads to complicated grief. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation of loss.



Yet, Long-Term Grief Pathologized by DSM-5

- Grief longer than two weeks labeled as illness; a grief disorder.
- Symptoms: preoccupation with lost person; difficulty finding meaning; putting life on hold; depression; difficulty eating, sleeping, working.
- But people whose loved ones vanish physically or psychologically also manifest these symptoms.



How Ambiguous Loss Differs From Ordinary Loss

- Unlike death, AL has no official verification of loss. The person may still be alive (e.g., dementia) or physically missing with no body to bury (e.g., kidnapped, swept away, vanished).
- AL creates complicated ***grief***, but complication is due to ***type*** of loss, not individual pathology.
- Grief is ongoing; no possibility of closure.



Difference B/W PTSD and Ambiguous Loss

- While both can lead to depression, anxiety, guilt, psychic numbing, flashbacks, distressing dreams, differences are:
- PTSD is an individual disorder, medically defined, individually diagnosed and treated. THE GOAL=return patient to health.
- Ambiguous loss is a relational disorder, thus relational interventions are needed. THE GOAL=the resiliency to live with ambiguous loss because it has no finality.



Effects: What People Say They Have Lost

- Loss of loved one as she/he was—and thus the relationship and attachment 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 now (on edge, not knowing, in limbo, frozen in place).
- Loss of trust in the world as a fair and rational place.
- Loss of dreams; thus loss of hope for the future.
- Loss of identity. Am I still married? Who is my family now?



Individual Effects of AL

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Hopelessness (no meaning); brain does not like ambiguity
- Helplessness (low mastery without facts)
- Confused identity (who am I now?)
- Increased ambivalence: social, not psychiatric
- Anxious attachment
- Frozen grief (sadness vs. depression)



Sadness vs. Depression

- Sadness: mild grieving and unhappy, but still functioning; oscillation.
Intervention: human connection, peer groups, social activities.
- Depression: sadness so deep one cannot function; cannot care for self or others.
Intervention: professional psychotherapy, family therapy, perhaps medication.

(Adapted from Boss, 2011, pp. 26 & 130.)



Family Systemic Effects From AL

- Family conflict: cutoffs, rifts, alienation
- Family rituals/celebrations: cancelled
- Roles: confused; who does what?
- Family/couple boundaries: who is in, who is out? Not clear.
- Family decision making: process frozen



Assessing Family Roles

- What marital/family roles or tasks have you lost?
- What roles or tasks have you gained?
- Can you manage the change?



Assessing Family Rules

- Who makes the decisions and plans for daily routines?
- Is gender, race, age, class, religion affecting your ability to cope?
- Is safety or poverty an issue?
- Is economic security an issue?



Assessing Family Rituals

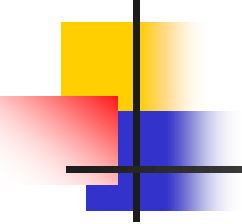
- What family and community celebrations, holiday events, and religious rituals did you observe *before* your ambiguous loss?
- How did you and your family adapt your usual rituals and celebrations *since* your ambiguous loss?
- Did your community help memorialize?

(See Robins, 2013; Saul, 2013.)

Intervention: Both-And Thinking

Dialectical Thinking

- My loved one is both gone—and here in my heart and mind.
- I think both he is dead—and maybe not.
- She is both here in body—and gone in mind and memory.
- I am both sad about the loss of my loved one—and searching to find new connections and social support.
- Other



Intervention: Guidelines for Living with Ambiguous Loss

- Finding Meaning (Ch. 4)
- Tempering Mastery (Ch. 5)
- Reconstructing Identity (Ch. 6)
- Normalizing Ambivalence (Ch. 7)
- Revising Attachment (Ch. 8)
- Discovering Hope (Ch. 9)

In Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience*. NY:
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1. Finding Meaning:

How to Make Sense of Your Loss

- What Helps? Giving the problem a name: e.g., “ambiguous loss;” talking with peers; using both-and thinking; finding spirituality; forgiveness; continuing but adapting family rituals and celebrations.
- What Hinders? Seeking revenge, retribution; secrets; being isolated.



2. Tempering Mastery: How to 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, etc.).
- What Hinders? Believing that you have failed if you are not "over it."



3. Reconstructing Identity: How to Know Who You Are Now

- What Helps? Finding supportive family members—or finding a “psychological” family, redefining family/marital 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.



4. Normalizing Ambivalence: How to Manage the Anxiety From Mixed Emotions

- What Helps? Normalizing anger and guilt, but not harmful actions; seeing conflicted feelings as normal; talking about them with a professional.
- What Hinders? Denying or keeping secret the idea that you sometimes may “wish it was over.”

5. Revising Attachment:

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, recognizing/celebrating what you still have), finding new human connections.
- What Hinders? Holding on without finding new attachments.

6. Discovering Hope:

How Can You Find New Hope When Your Loss Remains Ambiguous?

- What Helps? Becoming more comfortable with ambiguity (spirituality), laughing at absurdity, redefining justice, finding something you can control or master to balance the “not knowing,” accepting the “good-enough” relationship.
- What Hinders? Isolation: Insisting on always having the answer.



Know The Goals

- Enable people to move forward with living life despite the ambiguity in family member absence/presence.
- Find meaning, not closure.
- Increase the family's tolerance for the stress of ambiguity and unanswered questions.
- Help families live with a "less-than-perfect" outcome.



Try New Methods

- Family- and community-based interventions (systemic; contextual).
- Psycho-educational interventions.
- Skills training: Cognitive and emotional.
- Tailor-made interventions: Use the 6 guidelines but tailor them to culture, gender, generation, SES, stressor, and context.
- For details, see Boss, 2006.



Be Mindful of Cultural Differences

- Meaning and hope are influenced by cultural beliefs and values. Listen, collaborate, co-construct.
- Due to discrimination, prejudice, stigma, poverty, war, or terrorism, many people have no mastery or control over their lives, and thus need to be *empowered* before they can find the resiliency needed to live with ambiguous loss (Robins, 2010).
- Across cultures and religions, the empowerment of people who live with ambiguous loss requires societal support and education.



Practice Self-Reflection

- We cannot bring the families we work with farther than we ourselves can go in tolerating ambiguity.
- To work effectively with families experiencing ambiguous loss, we must first examine our own needs for certainty and control.
- Paradoxically, we lower stress when we surrender to the ambiguity.
- Let go of the idea of closure.



Look for and Build on the Natural Resilience in Families

- RESILIENCE: the ability to withstand adversity and become stronger for it.
- The majority of people suffering from traumatic loss, clear or ambiguous, are resilient. They can recover IF given family and community support (e.g., Boss, Beaulieu, Wieling, Turner, & LaCruz, 2003).
- Note cultural diversity vs. commonality.



Build Your Professional Resilience

- To help you reflect on your own losses, clear or ambiguous. (See Boss, 2006, pp. 197-210.)
- To avoid compassion fatigue, know the signs, take time off, talk with peers. (See Figley, 2002.)
- Be mindful of “drained empathy.”



Summary

- Ambiguous loss is a social disorder, not individual pathology.
- Ruptures family relationships.
- Naming the stressor allows coping.
- Both-and thinking helps find meaning and hope.
- AL Model is a stress/resilience model.



Ending Quote


"The dilemma for all of us is to bring clarity to an ambiguous situation. Failing that, and we will in most cases, the critical question is how to live with ambiguous loss. For each of us, the answer will be different. But the answers are less critical than the questions" (Boss, 1999/2000, p. 140).



Presentation Based On:

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Appendix A

Two Types of Ambiguous Loss

Physical
Absence

&

Psychological
Presence

Leaving Without
Good-Bye

Families where a person is physically missing, but is kept psychologically present since there is no verification of death.

Physical
Presence

&

Psychological
Absence

Good-Bye Without
Leaving

Families where a person is physically here, but his/her mind or memory is gone. The person is no longer as she/he used to be.

Appendix B

Examples of Two Types of AL

Leaving Without Good-Bye

Examples:

- The missing from WTC disaster
- The disappeared in S. America
- Earthquakes, tsunamis, avalanches
- Airplane explosions
- Boats sinking at sea
- Kidnapped children
- Missing soldiers

Good-Bye Without Leaving

Examples:

- Dementia from AD, TBI, stroke, Parkinson's, etc.
- Autism, chronic mental illness
- Depression
- Homesickness (immigrants, migrants)
- Addictions, obsessions
- Preoccupation with lost persons