Ambiguous Loss: Living Well With It, Supporting Others in It

Ideas from *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*
by Pauline Boss

I. Our Story

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II. Ambiguous Loss (copy the whole slide into this section and match the font, size, etc.)

A. Loss when the body is absent, yet the person is psychologically present in the minds of loved ones.
   - Examples: those missing from war, natural disasters, or kidnappings.
   - Also, parents absent due to divorce, adoption, and immigration.

B. Loss when a person is bodily present but is not the same emotionally or cognitively.
   - Examples: Alzheimer’s, dementia, addiction, mental illness, and debilitating brain injury.

III. Therapeutic Goals for Treating Ambiguous Loss

A. Finding Meaning

   1. What is this?
      a. Making sense of an event or situation. We need to help people find some positive meaning.
      b. Discern each person’s perception of what happened, and notice the degree of disagreement. Is guilt, shame, or blame apparent?

   2. What can help with Finding Meaning?
      a. Naming the problem
      b. Both/and thinking- the person is here and not here
      c. Perceiving suffering as inevitable
      d. Sacrifice for greater good or love
      e. Religion and spirituality
      f. Small good works
      g. Forgiveness
      h. Rituals
      i. Hope

B. Tempering Mastery

   1. Mastery (sense of control over one’s life) is not the same as self-efficacy (control over the performance of specific tasks).
2. What helps in Tempering Mastery?
   a. Recognizing that the world is not always just and fair
   b. Recognizing one’s efforts won’t always result in the desired outcome
   c. Decreasing self-blame
   d. Mastering ones’ internal self
   e. Telling stories in the company of trusted others
   f. Increasing human connection, not separation
   g. Managing and making decisions

3. What hinders Tempering Mastery?
   a. Too much mastery
   b. Too little mastery
   c. Ill-timed use of mastery

C. Reconstructing Identity

1. Identity is defined here as knowing who one is and what roles one will play in relation to others in the family and community.

2. Knowing who you are in relation to partially absent or present family members requires cognitive and emotional reconstructions of roles, status, boundaries, and rituals.
   a. Who am I now?
   b. What is really my family now?
   c. What roles am I expected to perform now?
   d. To what community do I now belong?
   e. Where is home?

D. Normalizing Ambivalence

1. Ambivalence is state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone. Normalizing Ambivalence means acknowledging its existence.

2. Ambiguity means lack of clarity- no validation or clarification of the loss.

3. Ambivalence, in more detail, refers to conflicted feelings and emotions either simultaneous or fluctuating (love and hate, attraction and repulsion, wanting a person dead and alive- all these things are normal).

4. Ambiguity is what one knows, and ambivalence what one feels.

5. What can help in Normalizing Ambivalence?
   a. Helping people see family and community as major resources for support and healing
b. Bringing conflicted feelings into awareness through telling and listening to narratives

c. Talking about guilt they might feel

d. Normalizing negative feelings

e. Working collaboratively: psychologists, psychiatrists, community leaders (clergy, first responders, and local educators)

f. Using the arts to bring mixed emotions to the surface (film, dance, creative writing, music, literature, painting, and theater)

g. Talking about what is lost and what is still there
   1. What did you lose?
   2. What do you still have?
   3. How do you feel about the ambiguity now?
   4. What are your views about what to do, how to proceed?

6. What does this loss mean to you now?

7. How do you see the missing person now?

E. Revising Attachment

Boss defines attachment in a more general sense- a relational and reciprocal relationship with a constant other. Deep connection between individuals in couples, families, or other close relationships.

Revising the attachment (as opposed to detaching) means not needing to have closure with a lost person but also not denying the loss. There is no linear process of letting go. Rarely is there acceptance, and there is never closure. Rather revising the attachment means shifting the relationship to take into account the ambiguity surrounding the loss.

1. What helps in Revising Attachment?
   a. Accepting the paradox of absence and presence- here and not here
   b. Being comfortable with unanswered questions.
   c. Including children/adolescents in therapy when parents or siblings disappear- hear each other’s perceptions of situation
   d. Using multiple-family and couple groups to build new connections
   e. Encouraging the use of the arts (story, song, film)
   f. Providing empathy and understanding that the situation is a stressful one
   g. Encouraging people to seek as much information as possible about the loss.
   h. Putting people in touch with support groups/others with similar experiences of trauma
   i. Helping individuals and families identify with peers to regain relational strength.
   j. Helping them discover what they have of the missing person and recognize what is lost
   k. Developing memorial ceremonies and farewell rituals

2. What hinders Revising Attachment?
a. Overemphasis on the following: individuation, closure, and focus on the past
b. The goal is to grieve and revise earlier hopes and dreams about the person and the relationship and to do this without the extreme reactions of absolute enmeshment or absolute detachment.

F. Discovering Hope
1. Discovering hope links back to meaning. Without meaning, there’s no hope. Without hope, there’s no meaning.
2. Definition:
   Hope is belief in a future good—a positive belief with the expectation of fulfillment. It is believing that suffering can stop and that comfort is possible in the future.
3. If hope for the status quo goes on too long without revision, it stops us from doing what needs to be done like paying attention to those still present in one’s life, going back to work, taking care of the children.
4. Hoping too long for what used to be erodes resilience. Our hopes and dreams for staying connected to the person must eventually be transformed into something attainable.
5. What can help in discovering hope?
   a. Having a communal opportunity for emotional expression through storytelling
   b. Using the arts
   c. Being with others who have experienced the same kind of loss
   d. Redefining justice (effort doesn’t always match outcome; bad things to good people).
   e. Working against injustice
   f. Practicing religion/spirituality
   g. Reflecting

IV. The Importance of Social Rituals – Our Ceremony of Ambiguous Loss
A. The Fight
1. The personal challenge of learning to live well with both having and not having someone the way you once did
2. The marital/familial/relational challenge of living well with ambiguous loss
3. How a ceremony of Ambiguous Loss helped people do both

Pauline Boss Quotes:

“Closely attached people who become separated through ambiguous loss suffer a trauma even greater than death. To regain resiliency, revising one’s attachment is essential. Neither ceremonies nor rituals exist to help clarify and honor such threatened attachments.”

“social rituals…and ceremonies…help us through tough transitions. They help to remind us, and those around us, that a transition (with its gains and losses) has taken place, and they create
a social space for expression of emotions and connection with our friends and family that helps with support.”

“Medical, religious, or legal experts rarely address ambiguous loss, and friends and relatives are usually not aware that such a phenomenon exists. The devastation wrought by unresolved grief is only intensified when no one validates it.”

“We are used to rituals for other life-changing events like funerals, but because there are no supportive rituals without clear evidence of death, families of the physically and psychologically missing are left to fend for themselves.”

V. The Importance of Listening
   A. When you encounter someone who has experienced ambiguous loss, give the person permission to grieve, and validate the loss. Listen for a long, long time.
   B. When the person takes a pause from talking say, “Tell me more,” or “Keep going,” or “Is there anything else?” Keep inviting people to talk until they are finished.
   C. Don’t try to fix the person or read your autobiography into their lives. And be very careful with pat answers about God’s will in their situation.

VI. Question and Answer

Bibliography


