

Understanding Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss is a feeling of grief or distress combined with confusion about the lost person or relationship. With ambiguous loss, there is no verification of death or certainty that the person will come back or return to the way they used to be. This uncertainty freezes the grief process and prevents closure.

Two Types of Ambiguous Loss:

1. When a person is physically present but psychologically unavailable.
2. When a person is physically absent but psychologically present.
(*This type most commonly occurs in foster care and adoption.*)

Who Can Feel Ambiguous Loss?

Adoptive parents might grieve their “wished for” biological child. Adoptive parents of special needs children may feel the loss of what the child could have been if he or she had not been prenatally exposed to drugs.

Birth parents feel the loss when a child is removed from their home. Birth mothers who give their child up for adoption often experience deep grief long after the adoption is finalized.

The child in foster care feels ambiguous loss when removed from the home. Parents are not physically present, but are thought about and missed many times every day. Ambiguous loss is made worse with multiple foster care placements.

The adopted child may grieve over their fantasy parent-child relationship that might have been.

Ambiguous Loss in the Child Welfare System

Everyone has experienced loss. The term foster implies loss; it is impossible to be a foster child and not experience loss. The loss a child in foster care experiences is more than the stress and trauma of adjusting to a new situation.

A child has many questions about his situation: Will my parents fight to get me back? Will I ever see my brothers and sisters again? How long will I have to stay with this foster family? Am I going to be moved again? Will I ever get to go home? How long will it take?

Foster and adoptive children often grieve the loss of everything that was familiar to them (parents, siblings, home, routines, physical surroundings, school, friends, pets), but the sense of loss can go unnoticed by others. The loss of cultural identity, social and educational continuity, and the ability to develop lasting friendships and keep up with peers are outcomes of foster care and adoption. These losses can significantly increase a child's feelings of ambiguity.

Many of the losses a child in care experiences and the grief he feels are unresolved; the loss is not openly mourned or socially supported. An important factor in resolving grief is the social support received from others. It is the ambiguity of the loss and the sense that the losses have been ignored or minimized by others that contributes to feelings of confusion. There are no funerals, no mourning rituals that show the child his deep loss is shared by others. The child wonders if he has the "right" to mourn since others do not seem to share his deep grief.

Symptoms of Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss is very stressful and leads to depression and symptoms similar to PTSD. The symptoms can be both physical (e.g., changes in eating or sleeping patterns) or emotional/psychological. Commonly experienced symptoms include:

- Emotional vulnerability or numbness
- Emotional instability or moodiness
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty with changes and transitions, even seemingly minor ones
- Trouble making decisions
- Feelings of being overwhelmed when asked to make a choice
- Extreme reactions to routine childhood or adolescent losses (last day of school, death of a pet, move to a new home, etc.)
- Learned helplessness and hopelessness
- Anxiety and/or guilt
- Inability to "move on" from a disappointment; feeling "stuck"

How to Help Children with Ambiguous Loss

1. Help the child identify what he has lost.
2. Give voice to the ambiguity. Acknowledge and validate any expressions of loss. Show you understand and sympathize.
3. Give the child permission to grieve the loss of his birth family.
4. Be aware that certain events (holidays, birthdays) may trigger intense feelings of loss.
5. Have reasonable expectations. The child will not overcome his feelings of loss within a prescribed timeframe.
6. Model healthy, normal responses to loss.

Adapted from:

Gilbert, K. R. (2007). Unit 9: Ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief. Retrieved from <http://www.indiana.edu/~familygrf/units/ambiguous.html>

Minnesota Adoption Resource Network. (n.d.). Understanding ambiguous loss. Retrieved from <http://www.mnadopt.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Understanding-Ambiguous-Loss.pdf>

North American Council on Adoptable Children. (2009). Ambiguous loss haunts foster and adopted children. Retrieved from <http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/ambigloss.html>