



## Understanding Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss is a term that is used to describe the grief or distress associated with a loss (usually a person or relationship) in which there is confusion or uncertainty about that person or relationship. There are two types of ambiguous loss:

- When the person is physically present but psychologically unavailable. An example of this might be when a child's parent has a mental health diagnosis or chemical use issues which make them emotionally unavailable to meet the needs of the child, even if that parent is physically present;
- When the person is physically absent but psychologically present. Examples of this would be when a child does not live with a parent due to divorce, incarceration, foster care or adoption

Ambiguous loss may overlap with trauma and attachment problems and symptoms may be similar to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A person experiencing ambiguous loss may:

- Have difficulty with transitions or changes
- Have difficulty making decisions; feeling “paralyzed” or overwhelmed when having to make choices about one's life
- Have decreased ability to cope with routine childhood or adolescent losses – not being able to “move on” from a disappointment or loss or feeling “stuck”
- Exhibit learned helplessness or hopelessness
- Have depression and/or anxiety
- Have feelings of guilt

Ambiguous loss affects adopted children who may think about their birth family, but birth family members and adoptive parents might also experience ambiguous loss. Both birth family members and adopted children may wonder about each other, or may mourn or fantasize about what it would have been like to stay together. Adoptive parents, especially if they adopt after struggles with infertility, may experience ambiguous loss over pregnancies that ended in miscarriages or the loss of the dream of having children biologically.

Pauline Boss, author of *Ambiguous Loss: Coming to Terms with Unresolved Grief*, writes, “Although the birth mother is more conscious of the actual separation than is the baby given up for adoption . . . the birth mother is thought about often and kept psychologically present in the minds of both the adoptive mother and the adopted child.” Consider how much more this loss might be felt by youth who were not separated at birth but lived with the mother or father for months or years before the separation occurred; or the effect of loss on children who experience multiple placements and caregivers. Each move from a caregiver is one more time a child could experience ambiguous loss over the separation.

It was once thought that a child could not feel loss over the separation from birth family they had never known; however more recent research has shown that adopted youth may in fact grieve over the loss (Grotevant et al, 2000). Adopted individuals who were able to discuss difficult feelings about the uncertainty and lack of information about birth family with their adoptive family showed less symptoms of ambiguous loss than those whose adoptive families had more closed conversations (Powell & Afifi, 2005).

Some adopted children make up their own story about the circumstances of their adoption or use “magical thinking” to describe their imagined adoption scenario when they lack information. Adoptees have described the lack of knowledge about their biological families and reasons for separation as like “a book without the first few chapters” or as “lives written in pencil that can easily be erased.” Some researchers have found that ambiguous loss often peaks for adopted youth during adolescence when identity becomes part of the teenager’s developmental tasks.

According to Boss, “. . . the greater the ambiguity surrounding one’s loss, the more difficult it is to master [the loss] and the greater one’s depression, anxiety, and family conflict” Why is this?

- It is difficult for a person to resolve grief if they don’t know if the loss is temporary or final
- Uncertainty about the loss prevents a child’s ability to reorganize roles and relationships in their family
- There is a lack of a clear, symbolic ritual surrounding the loss
- The lost relationship is not socially recognized or is hidden from others
- The griever is not socially recognized (this is often the case with birth family, regardless of whether the child was removed voluntarily or involuntarily)
- The circumstances that led to loss are perceived negatively by others

In the case of a parent’s death, for example, people understand the loss and rituals (such as funerals) help the child understand and provide closure to the relationship with that parent. However, as Boss writes, “Existing rituals and community supports only address clear-cut loss such as death.” When a child is separated from his or her parents due to child protection intervention, relinquishment or abandonment, the parent may be physically absent but the psychological presence may still be very much in the child’s mind. Knowing the parent is out there “somewhere” can be confusing or anxiety-inducing for the child. They may wonder if they will run into the parent at the grocery store, for example, or wonder if the parent will call them someday.

Also, because adoption is commonly viewed positively as a joyous event in our society, a child may feel confusion or guilt over being asked to be happy that they were separated from their birth family. Extended family members and community may not recognize or understand that adoption is directly related to the loss of the original birth family.

### **Suggestions for helping children manage feelings of ambiguous loss:**

- Give voice to the ambiguity. Provide a name to the feelings of ambiguous loss and acknowledge how difficult it is to live with this ambiguity.
- Learn to redefine what it means to be a family. Boss writes, “Acting as if the membership list of an adoptive family is etched in stone may in the end be more stressful than explicitly recognizing that the family has some ambiguous boundaries.”
- Adopted children need to be given permission to grieve the loss of their family of origin without feeling guilty
- Help the child identify what has been lost (the loss may not be limited to the actual parent – loss could also include the membership of that extended family, the loss of the home or town they were born in, the loss of having a family that looks like them, the loss of their family surname, or for internationally adopted youth the loss of birth country and language)
- Create a “loss box.” In her work with adopted adolescents, therapist Debbie Riley guides the youth as they decorate a box in which they place items that represent things they’ve lost. This gives the youth both a ritual for acknowledging the loss and a way for them to revisit the people or relationships in the future.
- Include birth parents and birth family members in the child’s family “orchard” so the child can literally and figuratively place them in their self-narrative “history”
- Sometimes certain events trigger feelings of loss such as holidays, birthdays or the anniversary of an adoption. Alter or add to family rituals to acknowledge the child’s feelings about these important people or relationships that have been lost. For example, adding an extra candle representing the child’s birth family on his or her cake may be a way of remembering their part in your child’s life on that day; or even an acknowledgement like “I bet your mom and dad are thinking about you today” recognizes those ambiguous relationships.

- Don't set an expectation that grief over ambiguous loss will be "cured," "fixed" or "resolved" in any kind of predetermined time frame. Explain that feelings related to ambiguous loss will come and go at different times in a person's life and provide a safe place for the child to express those feelings.

Adults must be mindful of the trauma that accompanies each transition to a different placement or with new caregivers. It is important for social workers, foster parents and adoptive parents to recognize how ambiguous loss and grief may affect adopted youth - especially as they near adolescence and young adulthood.

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**For more information:**

Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief. Pauline Boss, (1999). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ambiguous loss in adolescents: Increasing understanding to enhance intervention. L. Ashbourne, L. Baker & C. Male (2002). This free, downloadable pdf is available at [www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca).

*Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow.* K.J. Doka (2002). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

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Uncertainty management and adoptees' ambiguous loss of their birth parents. K.A. Powell & T.D. Afifi (2005). *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Vol. 22(1): 129-151.

*Beneath the mask: Understanding adopted teens.* D. Riley & J. Meeks (2006). Burtonsville, MD: C.A.S.E. Publications.