SafeGuards
TRAUMA INFORMED TRAINING

WHAT IS AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

Definition

Loss that lacks clarity, closure, or public recognition. Ambiguous loss often leads to complicated grief that is overlooked or invalidated by society.

The Three Primary Types

Physical absence with psychological presence

- Missing loved one
- Missing due to abduction, war, natural disaster
- Abandonment
- Migration

Psychological absence with physical presence

- A family member with a severe mental illness
- A loved one with dementia, chronic illness, substance use, addiction

Relationships in transition

- Awaiting court decisions
- Pending adoption

Impacts

What are some of the ways people are impacted by ambiguous loss?

- Mistrust
- Withdrawal
- Prolonged irritability and anger
- Feeling of powerlessness and fatigue
- Behavioural issues
- Develop a sense of indifference about relationships
- Engaging in superficial relationships
- Engaging in disavowing dependence- deciding to "hold off adults" to not get hurt

(Boss, 2002)

Understanding and Support

- Grief for ambiguous loss becomes disenfranchised
- Defined as a hidden sorrow, the loss is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported
- In young people, this unmet need may lead to a display of anger, sense of hopelessness, self-blame, and enduring behavioural, emotional, and relational difficulties which elevates vulnerability to physical and mental health challenges
- In response we can acknowledge this experience by applying the HEAR model: Honoring the loss, Establish a care community, Attune to the lack of finality, and Reduce ambiguity whenever possible

(Kor et al., 2023)

Resources

Alzheimer Society

National Council on Family Relations

Understanding Grief

References

1. Boss, P. (2002). Ambiguous loss in families of the missing. The Lancet, 350, 39-40. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)11815-0
2. Knight, C., & Gitterman, A. (2019). Ambiguous loss and its disenfranchisement: The need for social work intervention. Families in Society, 100(2), 164–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389418799937
3. Kor, K., Park, J., Dear, R., & Fabrianesi, B. (2023). Responding to children's ambiguous loss in out-of-home care: The HEAR practice model. Child & Family Social Work,1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13072

Scan to learn more about SafeGuards Training course, "Ambiguous Loss: A Framework to Understand and Respond"

Information and training provided by Amanda Rawn-Alton

www.safeguards-training.net