



## Ambiguous Loss, Secondary Loss & Disenfranchised Grief©

### ▶ **Ambiguous Loss**

A loss that is not very clear. It is unseen, or not accepted as valid. <sup>8</sup>

### ▶ **Ambiguous Loss and Secondary Losses<sup>1,8</sup>**

▶ Ambiguous loss occurs when someone feels uncertain about who or what has been lost or whether a loss as even occurred at all. Consider three basic scenarios:

(1) a person is **physically present but psychologically absent** (ex. Dementia/Substance Use Disorder)

(2) a person is **physically absent but possibly still alive** (ex. absentee parent/Substance Use Disorder)

(3) a person is **physically present but some major element of their identity and/or the relationship with them has changed** (ex. divorce/Substance Use Disorder).

**In all these instances, something significant has changed and these changes usher in a sense of loss.** However, a person might feel conflicted and confused about whether they should grieve these losses because the person is still alive and there is often hope that things will change and return to "normal."

**Some examples of Secondary Losses that could be considered ambiguous include:**

- Absent family and friends.
- Family and friends who are still present but treat you differently.
- Identity changes within yourself. Perhaps a changed sense of purpose, lack of faith, or adoption of a new belief system.
- Identity changes in family members who are also grieving.
- The onset of physical or psychological disorders in yourself or family members triggered by the death and associated stressors.

- If it is discovered someone you know is responsible for your loved one's death.
- Learning a secret about your loved one after their death and questioning their identity.

### **Other Secondary Losses**

- Loss of family structure.
  - Loss of primary relationship.
  - Loss of the familiar way of relating to family & friends.
  - Loss of support systems.
  - Loss of financial security.
  - Loss of the past –not wanting to share memories that cause pain.
  - Loss of the future – plans, relationships, dreams.
  - Loss of self-confidence –aware of the limitations of life.
  - Loss of ability to make decisions.
  - Loss of ability to see choices.
  - Loss of emotional security.
  - Loss of sense of humor.
  - Loss of ability to focus/function.
  - Loss of health.
  - Loss of patience with grief process & life in general.
- ▶ **Disenfranchised Grief**
- "...the types of loss that are not so readily recognized or supported by society. ...losses that might be stigmatized, including death by suicide or from disease, or self-destructive behaviors like smoking or alcoholism."<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ This kind of grief/loss is reinforced by the stigma/shame that often accompanies Substance use Disorder (SUD) and is transferred to the loved ones still in relationship or who grieve if death occurs.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Ignorance, stigma, and shame regarding the disease may encourage family and friends to keep SUD a secret as to the reason for death.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ Stigma and shame that often accompany those with SUD are transferred to the loved ones who grieve.<sup>16</sup>

► **Complicated Grief: (DSM-5 Diagnosed mental illness)**

- "...is a persistent form of intense grief in which maladaptive thoughts and dysfunctional behaviors are present along with continued yearning, longing, and sadness and/or preoccupation with thoughts and memories of the person who died."<sup>15</sup>

References:

<sup>1</sup>Ambiguous Grief Part1 <https://whatsyourgrief.com/ambiguous-grief-grieving-someone-who-is-still-alive/> Ambiguous Grief Part 2 <https://whatsyourgrief.com/a-biguous-grief-part-2>

<sup>7</sup>Doka, K. (Ed.). (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognising hidden sorrow*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

<sup>8</sup> Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Feigelman, W., Jordan, J., & Bernard, S., (2011). Parental grief after a child's drug death compared to other death causes: Investigating a greatly neglected bereavement population. *Omega*, 63(4), 291-316. Slide 13,15

<sup>10</sup> Valentine et al. "Bereavement Following Substance Misuse: A Disenfranchised Grief," *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 2016, Vol. 72(4) 283–301. The Author(s) 2016.

<sup>15</sup> The Center for Complicated Grief Columbia School of Social Work, 1255 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027  
<https://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/professionals/complicated-grief-professionals/overview/>

<sup>16</sup> Jordan, J. R. Ph.D., "Traumatic Loss: New Understandings, New Directions," Minnesota Coalition for Death Education and Support Spring Conference May 2, 2014.

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