

Ambiguous Loss

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developed from research by Pauline Boss, Ph.D. in her book:

Loving Someone Who Has Dementia: How to find hope while coping with stress and grief

Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs without closure or understanding. As it relates to dementia, ambiguous loss happens when your loved one is physically present but psychologically and/or cognitively absent. One of the biggest challenges is learning how to cope with the fact that your loved one is both present and absent at the same time. Our brains have a difficult time making sense of the fact that two seemingly opposite things can be true at the same time, that presence and absence can exist in the same person and in the same situation.

Dementia creates a loss that is ongoing; thus your grief is ongoing. Your grief and ability to cope with ambiguous loss over time can be complex, with many contributing factors, such as potential family conflict, multiple stressors, judgement and lack of understanding from others, a sense of isolation, rigid perceptions and cultural stigma, and finally, our culture's anxiety when it comes to ambiguity. We as humans like to have answers, to have clarity, and this is not always possible. When it comes to living with someone who has dementia, the ambiguity and loss lasts for years.

This begs the question, how do we as caregivers cope, handle stress, and find resilience in the midst of the unknown, in the midst of ambiguity, in the midst of an ongoing sense of loss?

The answer is to focus on our own coping strategies and resilience. To live with ambiguity, it's important to practice being present in the moment, to find whatever solace or beauty can be found in the here and now. The tools and skills that you are learning at the retreat are geared toward helping you with this.

Pauline Boss offers 7 guidelines for working with ambiguous loss. Any time that you can take a few minutes of quiet time, sit and meditate or journal about one of these guidelines. Notice what thoughts, bodily sensations and emotions come up for you. How can you make a slight shift in your perspective or focus? How can you give yourself and your loved one some grace and compassion? Feel your breath, your body, and your emotions. Breathe it in. Exhale & let it go.

1. Rather than closure, find or create a sense of acceptance, peace, purpose & meaning
2. Balance control with acceptance
3. Broaden your identity
4. Manage your mixed emotions
5. Hold on and let go
6. Imagine new hopes and dreams
7. Take the time to mind yourself