

Ambiguous Loss

Kathryn Brosseau BSW RSW
October 26, 2019

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

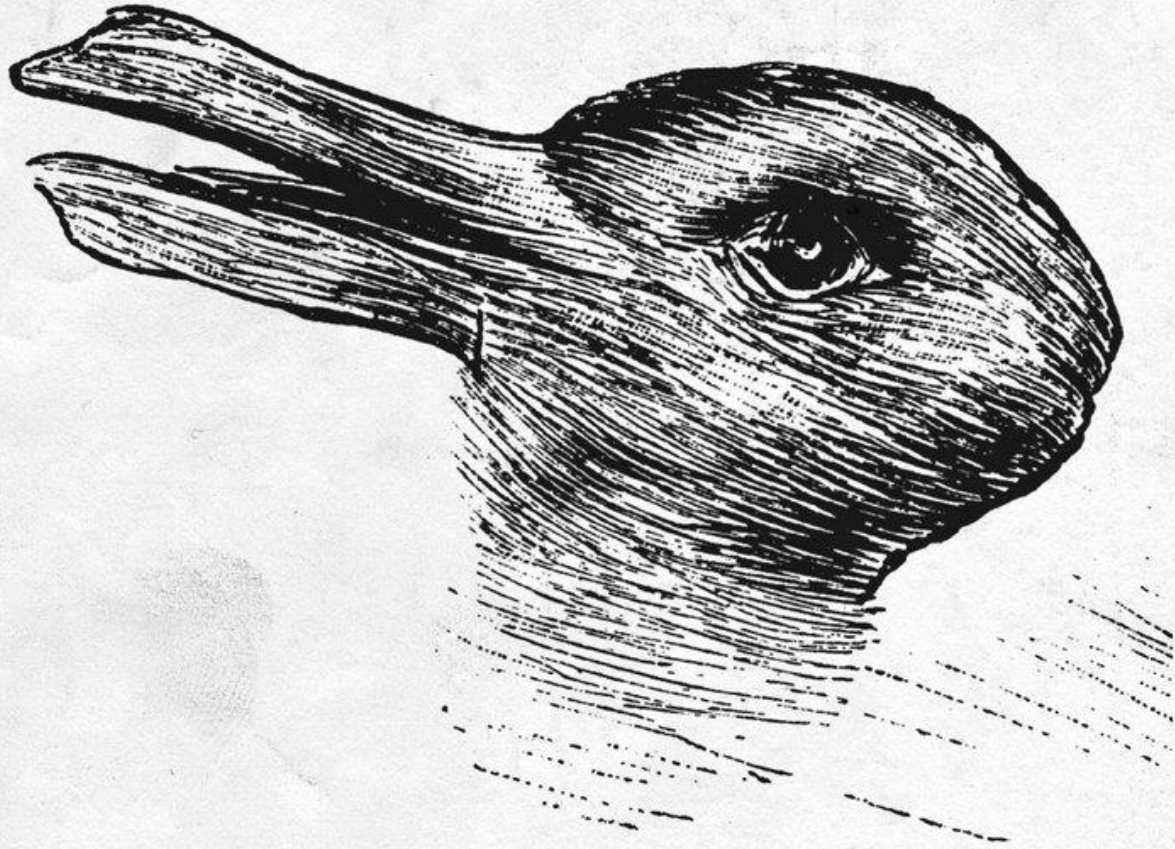
Disclosures: No financial or business relationships to disclose.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

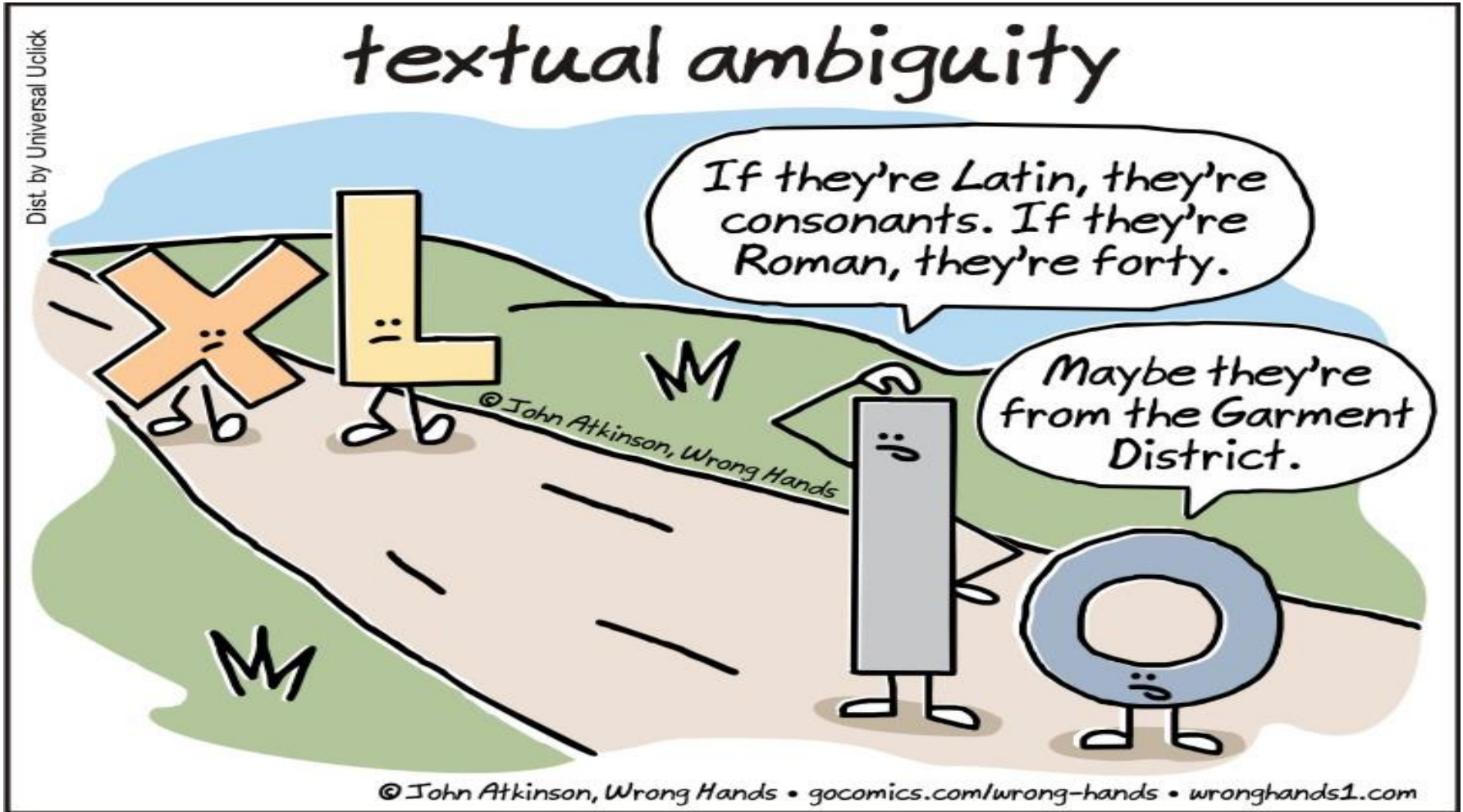
Objectives

- To understand what ambiguous loss (AL) is and the types of AL
- To acknowledge AL, grief and mourning
- To review 7 guidelines that will help build resiliency
- To appreciate when to ask for help

WHAT IS AMBIGUOUS LOSS?



AMBIGUOUS LOSS



WHAT IS AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

Ambiguous loss is a loss that is unclear; it has no resolution and no closure. It is a loss that has no official verification: it can't be clarified, cured or fixed.

TWO TYPES OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

The person is perceived as **physically** absent but is **psychologically** present.

The person is perceived as **psychologically** absent but is **physically** present.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Physically absent but **psychologically** present:

- * Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women
- * Incarceration
- * Soldier who is deployed or is MIA
- * Adoption
- * Separation/Divorce

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Psychologically absent but **physically** present:

- * Dementia
- * Addiction
- * Chronic Mental Illness
- * Depression

AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND PARKINSON'S DISEASE

Parkinson's Disease may present the challenge of both types of ambiguous losses. As PD is progressive, the losses continue with a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability that are typical of ambiguous losses.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Ambiguous loss can cause both personal and family problems because the situation lacks certainty and is beyond our control

Ambiguous loss may make us feel helpless and/or hopeless thus making us prone to depression, anxiety and relationship conflicts

AMBIGUOUS LOSS



AMBIGUOUS LOSS: GRIEF AND MOURNING

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when we have a loss

Mourning is the outward expression of grief.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: GRIEF AND MOURNING

“Grief is like the ocean, it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.” *

Vicki Harrison



AMBIGUOUS LOSS



AMBIGUOUS LOSS: WHAT IS LOST?

- Loss of my loved one as they were
- Loss of our roles
- Loss of our dreams for the future
- Loss of control over my life
- Loss of freedom
- Loss of financial security
- Loss of trust in the world as a fair and rational place
-

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: COPING STYLES

Problem-Focused Coping: Judgement and Reasoning

Emotion-Focused Coping: Acknowledging Feelings

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: GUIDELINES FOR THE JOURNEY



AMBIGUOUS LOSS: 7 GUIDELINES FOR THE JOURNEY

1. Recognize Ambiguous Loss

Recognize ambiguous loss; name it and acknowledge that you are not to blame. It is beyond your control. Talk with peers, find forgiveness, continue to adapt and change, use “both-and” thinking, find spirituality. Acknowledge that the world is not always a fair place and it is not your fault.

2. Call on Others for Support

Who is there to help when things are tough? It may be family, friends, neighbors, church community, support groups, government agencies or others. Isolation does not help and is harmful to your physical, psychological and emotional well-being. Build your support system. Ask for help. Tell people what you need.



3. Be Aware of Anger and Guilt

Anger and guilt are common, typical emotions that you may feel in response to your situation. What impact is anger/guilt having on your life? How does it impact those around you? Find someone, who you trust, to talk to about these difficult emotions.



4. Revisit Your Family Roles

Family roles will not remain the same. What changes have occurred already and what are your tasks now? What role changes are causing you distress? What role changes are creating conflicts with your care partner, your family and others? What can you foresee changing and what would help you manage those changes? Your roles, your relationships and your identity may all change and change many times...

5. Balance Your Thinking

Balance your thinking means to steer away from the absolutes. It is less stressful to embrace the paradoxical thinking of “ My loved one is here and gone”. Grieve what you have lost and recognize/celebrate what you still have.



6. Finding Hope and Creating Dreams

Take time to think about what your dreams/hopes are for the future. It may be difficult but create something to “look forward to”. Accept the “good-enough relationship”. Practice gratitude. Redefine or find new meanings for what is lost.



7. Look After Yourself

Find activities that help you manage when you are feeling powerless. Activities may be problem-focused or emotion-focused. Be mindful of stress and stressors. Seek professional help if you are struggling.

“ A dull knife needs to be sharpened on a regular basis to be useful.”

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: CHECK IN



AMBIGUOUS LOSS: HOW AM I DOING?

Discuss with other caregivers or a professional if you feel:

- Sad, mildly depressed but still functioning
- Guilty about a decision you need to make or just feeling “guilty”
- Unable to ask for help from family or friends
- Stuck or confused
- No one is hearing you

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: HOW AM I DOING?

Discuss with a therapist if:

- Family stress levels are so high that....
- Relationships with others are put on hold as caregiving takes all of your time
- Conflict with family, neighbors, or friends has increased
- Family celebrations/traditions are cancelled
- Family and friends neglect both you and your partner/family, no one calls or offers to help
- You feel abandoned

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: HOW AM I DOING?

When to seek immediate professional help:

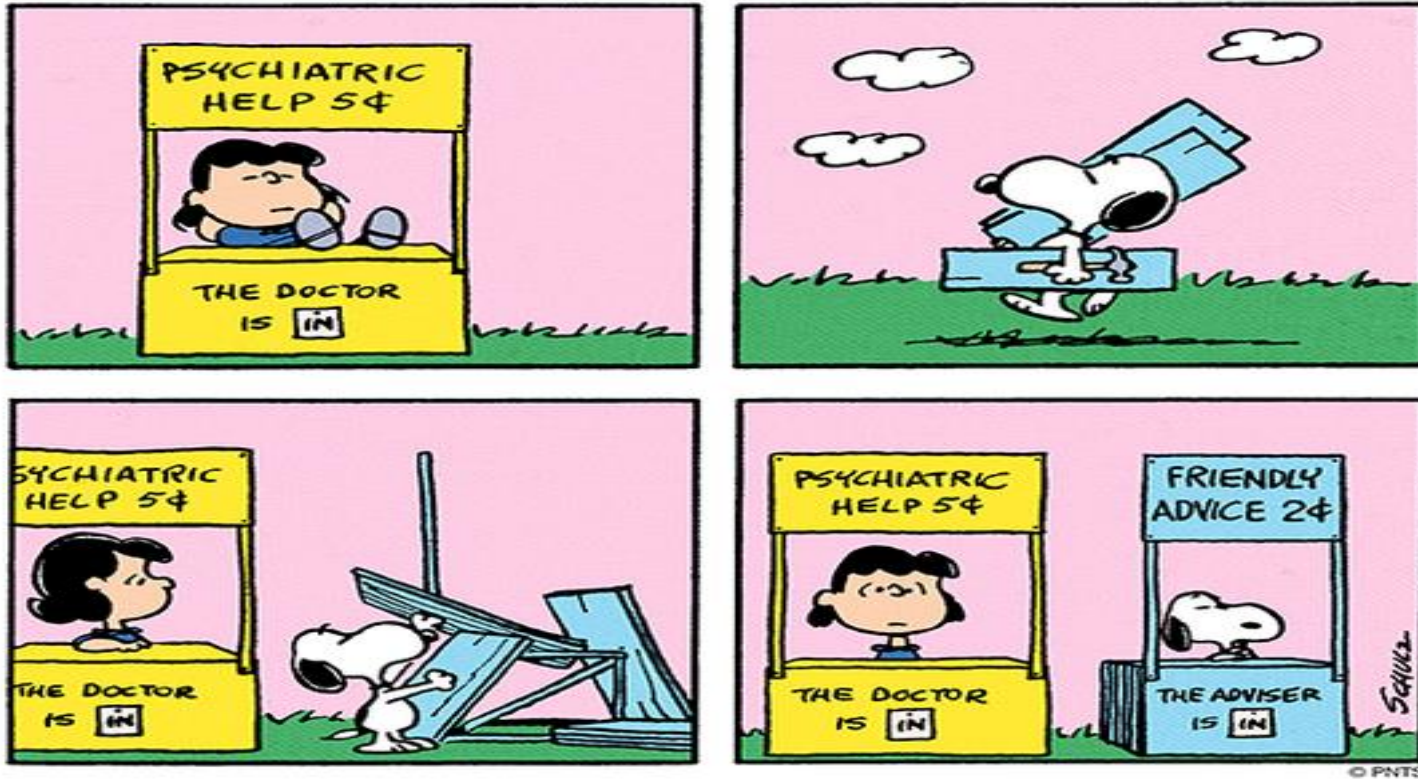
- Feel so depressed, hopeless, anxious that you can't function
- Feel physically ill
- Feel in danger
- Feel like hurting yourself or the person you are caring for
- Your intake of alcohol or recreational drugs increases

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: HOW AM I DOING?

When to seek immediate professional help:

- Don't eat well; eating too much, not enough, or poorly
- Don't sleep well; always on high alert
- No longer care about taking care of yourself
- There is no joy in your life
- See your own death as the only way out

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: FIND HELP



AMBIGUOUS LOSS

- Boss, P. (1999). **Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief**. Boston: Harvard University Press
- Boss, P. (2011). **Loving Someone Who Has Dementia**. Jossey-Bass
- Brown, Brene (2010). **The Gifts Of Imperfection**. Hazelden Publishing
- Posen, David (2017). **The Little Book of Stress Relief**. Firefly Books
- Wolfelt, Alan (2007). **Living in the Shadow of the Ghosts of Grief**. Companion Press.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

“Keep your face always toward the sunshine and the shadows will fall behind you”.* Walt Whitman

