

# AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

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## WHAT IS GRIEF?

- Grief is the natural response to the loss of someone who has died
- Responses may be emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, spiritual
- It is an individual and very personal experience

# IF IT'S 'AMBIGUOUS' LET'S START WITH A WORD DEFINITION

## **Ambiguous** [am'bigyoʊəs]

- open to more than one interpretation; having a double meaning.
- unclear or inexact because a choice between alternatives has not been made.
- **WORD ORIGIN:** early 16th century (in the sense 'indistinct, obscure'): from Latin *ambiguus* 'doubtful'

## LIMINAL SPACE

- Participants "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way. Continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt. (Wikipedia)

## WHAT IS AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

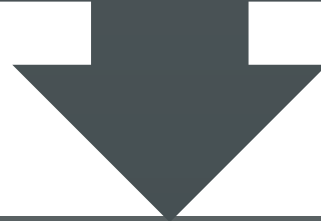
- Ambiguous Loss is a type of loss that occurs without closure or a clear definite ending
- First used in the late 1970s by Pauline Boss, a researcher who studied families of soldiers who went missing in action

## WHAT IS AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

- It can be a response to the loss of relationship in two ways:
  - someone who is physically present but may be psychologically absent (eg: dementia, mental health illness, drug or alcohol use)
  - someone who is psychologically present but could be physically absent (eg: person is unable to be physically available, living away from home)

WHAT IS  
ANTICIPATORY  
GRIEF?

Anticipatory grief is grief that one may experience before an impending or imminent loss



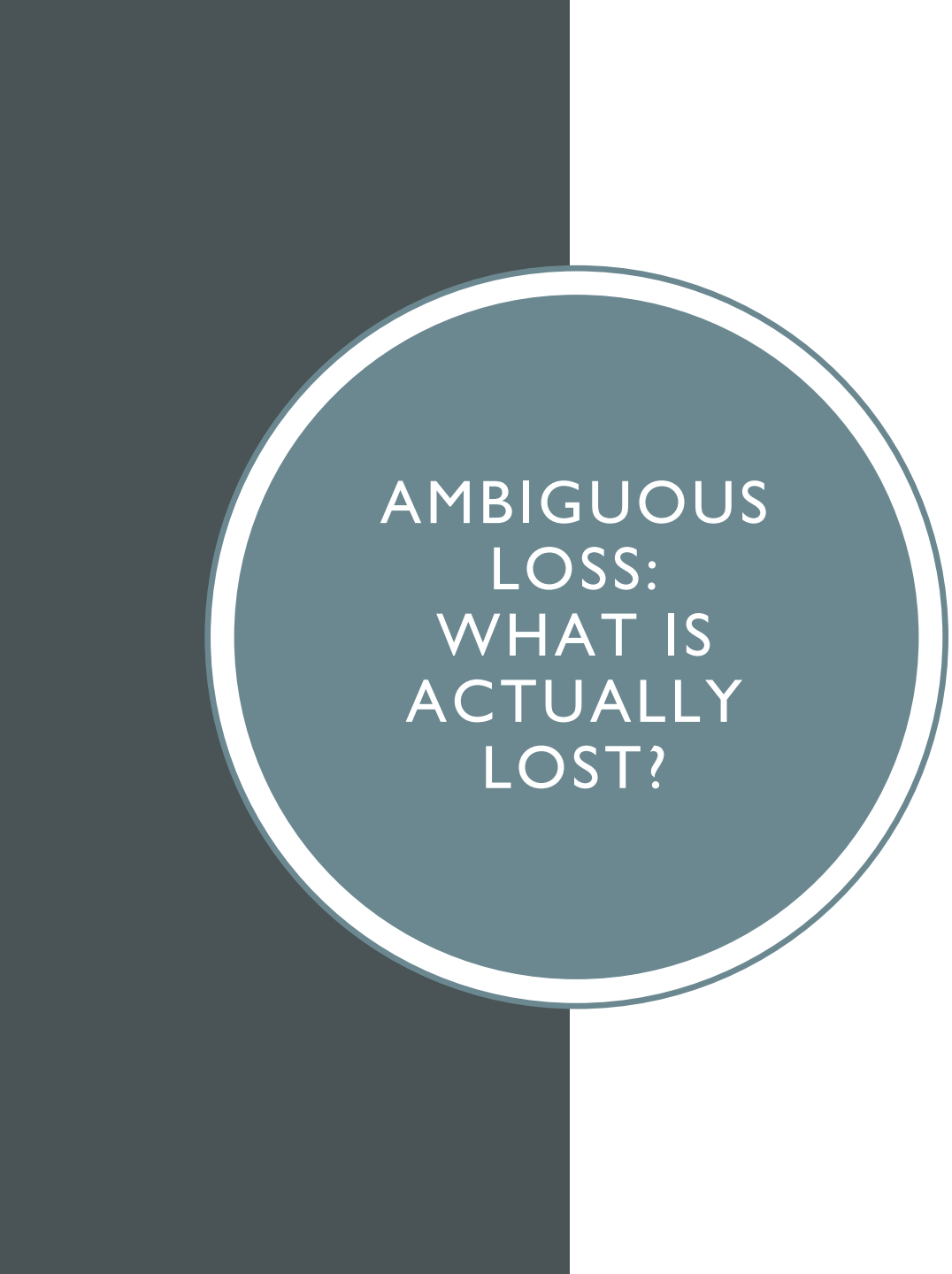
For example: the expected death of a loved one, expected loss of ability and relationship due to advancing illness

## AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

Both Ambiguous Loss and Anticipatory Grief:

- normal reaction to an uncommon loss experience
- can compromise relationships
- can result in complicated grief
- can compromise ability to cope





AMBIGUOUS  
LOSS:  
WHAT IS  
ACTUALLY  
LOST?

- Loss of aspects of the person as he/she was, resulting in a changed relationship and changed sense of attachment
- Loss of identity
- Loss of a sense of control over one's life
- Loss of meaning and understanding of life
- Loss of the expected or assumed future

## POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

Sense of  
hopelessness

Feeling  
helpless

Who am I  
now?

Depression  
and/or  
anxiety

Social  
isolation

Impeded grief

## BARB AND ED

- Barb was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2017
- Early symptoms: walking, tremors
- Advancing symptoms: eating certain foods, fatigue, "good days and bad days"

## SHARON AND DON

- Sharon was diagnosed in 2005
- Don as at home care-giver
- Many trips to ER ... stiches, contusions, cracked & broken ribs, culminating in a broken neck
- Eventual move to a care facility in 2019



## THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

The goal is to build *resiliency* to live with ambiguous loss or anticipatory grief long term as there may be no solution (Boss, 2013)

# WHAT HELPS WHEN LIVING WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

01

Finding  
Meaning

02

Tempering  
Mastery

03

Reconstructing  
Identity

04

Normalizing  
Ambivalence

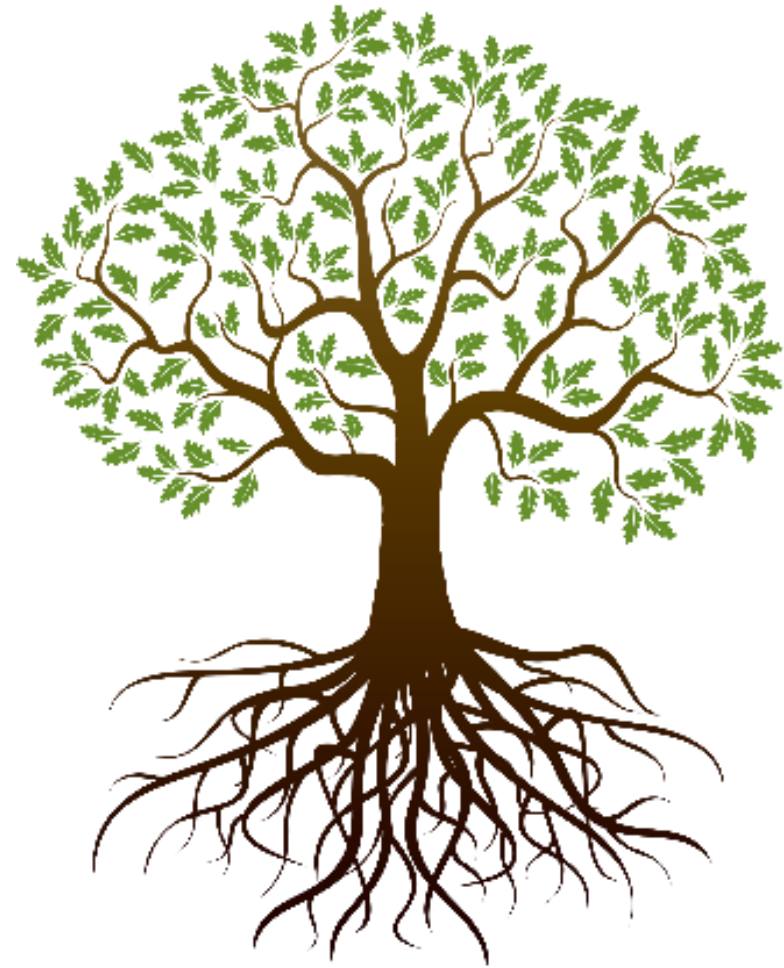
05

Revising  
Attachment

In Boss, P. (2006). Loss, Trauma, and Resilience. NY: Norton

FIND AND/OR MAKE MEANING  
MAKING SENSE OF YOUR LOSS(ES)

- Initially: “Is this really happening?” Barb
- Eventually: “Get over and get on with it.” Barb
  
- “Our sharing as partners over the previous 50+ years helps and is important.” Don
- “I routinely seek knowledge and insight from others.” Don



FIND AND/OR MAKE MEANING  
MAKING SENSE OF YOUR LOSS(ES)

- Name your problem
- Making meaning is a responsibility
- Reaching out for and accepting support from others



UNDERSTANDING THE  
ROLE OF CONTROL:  
ADJUSTING NEED FOR  
CONTROL AND  
ACCEPTING UNCERTAINTY

“We don’t know  
what’s ahead for  
us.” Ed

“The more I  
dwell on the  
Parkinson’s, the  
more severe the  
symptoms seem  
to be.” Barb

“I can decide  
how I want to  
feel and act in  
the future.” Don

“Believing that *I*  
*can’t do it* ...  
then proving  
that *I can* is very  
empowering.”  
Don



UNDERSTANDING THE  
ROLE OF CONTROL:  
ADJUSTING NEED FOR  
CONTROL AND  
ACCEPTING UNCERTAINTY

Accept  
lack of  
control

Decrease  
self-blame

Don't  
focus on  
uncertainty

Focus on  
what you  
know and  
control

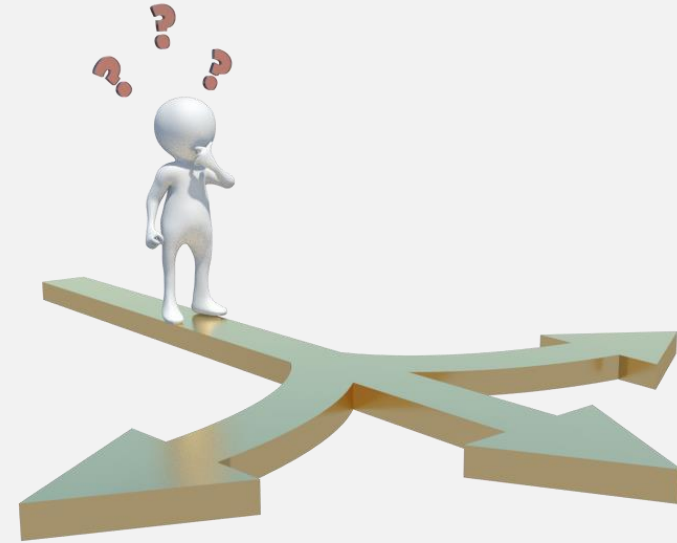
WHO AM I NOW?:  
WEATHERING THE  
CHANGE OF IDENTITIES

- “One must be both honest with oneself and realistic.” Don
- “I’m learning some new things and trying new roles.” Ed



WHO AM I NOW?:  
WEATHERING THE  
CHANGE OF IDENTITIES

- Be honest about the changes in yourself and others
- Discuss roles and expectations
- Be open to change



AMBIVALENCE AS 'NORMAL':  
MANAGING THE STORM OF EMOTIONS AND  
THOUGHTS



[am 'big yō əs]

“My greatest fear was not being able to see an end to my situation. The stress and anxiety of our difficult daily existence produced anger.” Don

AMBIVALENCE AS 'NORMAL':  
MANAGING THE STORM OF EMOTIONS AND  
THOUGHTS



[am 'big yō əs]

- Normalize anger and guilt
- Express feelings in a healthy, non-harmful way
- Accept ambiguity
- Practice both/and thinking



TRANSFORMING ATTACHMENTS:  
HOW CAN YOU ADJUST TO THE CHANGING  
WAYS OF STAYING CONNECTED

- “I really do miss my wife ... who and what she was before the Parkinson’s but there’s nothing I can do to change that other than to recall and cherish good memories.” Don
- “Being part of a community helps. Staying connected with family and friends.” Ed



TRANSFORMING ATTACHMENTS:  
HOW CAN YOU ADJUST TO THE CHANGING  
WAYS OF STAYING CONNECTED

- Recognizing and accepting the changing aspects of the relationship
- Adjusting how you spend time with others
- Strengthen bonds with family and friends
- Be open to new connections

REDEFINING HOPE  
DISCOVERING NEW  
LANDSCAPES OF HOPE  
IN A WORLD OF  
AMBIGUITY

- “We’ll keep travelling until the wheels fall off.” Ed
- “We’ll deal with the changes as they come.” Ed





REDEFINING HOPE  
DISCOVERING NEW  
LANDSCAPES OF HOPE  
IN A WORLD OF  
AMBIGUITY

- Increase comfort with ambiguity
- Let go of the need to have answers or certainty
- Adjust expectations and see things as 'good enough'





## SUMMARY

- Naming it makes coping easier
- Ambiguous loss is more than just an individual experience, it is imbedded in community
- Ambiguous loss can change relationships with family and friends
- Being flexible in one's thinking style and perspective can help create meaning and hope

THANK YOU

Parkinson Society British  
Columbia ([www.parkinson.bc.ca](http://www.parkinson.bc.ca))

Dr. Pauline Boss  
([www.ambiguousloss.com](http://www.ambiguousloss.com))

Community contributors: Don,  
Sharon, Barb and Ed



Peace Arch Hospice Society

*...a special kind of caring*

## REFERENCES

- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief*. Cambridge: Harvard University. Paperback reprint in 2000.
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience*. New York: Norton.