



Ambiguous Loss: Grieving the Life You Thought You'd Have

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Ambiguous loss is grief without closure, without a funeral, and often without anyone around you recognizing that you're grieving at all. For parents of a child living with mental illness, it can mean mourning the future you once pictured for your child and for yourself, even though your child is still here.

You might not have had a name for what you've been feeling. Maybe it hits you at a friend's daughter's wedding, or when someone mentions their grandchild's first steps. A quiet ache you can't fully explain, because nobody died. Your child is alive. They're right here. And yet something is gone, and you feel it in your chest every time the calendar turns to a season that was supposed to look different.

If that sounds familiar, you're not imagining it and you're not being dramatic. What you're experiencing has a name, and it's more common among parents of children with mental illness than most people realize. You're allowed to grieve what you've lost, even when your child is still with you.

What Does Ambiguous Loss Mean?

Ambiguous loss is grief that comes without clear answers or closure. Dr. Pauline Boss first used the term while studying families of soldiers missing in action, and she later expanded it to include families whose loved one is physically present but psychologically or emotionally changed.

There are two types of ambiguous loss. The first is when someone is physically absent but psychologically present. The second, and the most relevant here, is when someone is physically

present but psychologically absent. Your child is here, but symptoms have changed them. They are, as families often describe it, "here but not here."

What makes this kind of loss so painful is that there's no finality. With death, as devastating as it is, there are rituals. A funeral. A meal from a neighbor. Cards in the mail. But ambiguous loss offers none of that. There's no ceremony for mourning the college graduation that didn't happen or the phone call your child can no longer hold. And because the loss is invisible to most people around you, it can feel impossibly lonely.

The Losses in Your Child's Life

When a child lives with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, severe depression, or another serious mental health condition, certain milestones you once assumed were guaranteed begin to slip out of reach. Things like college, steady work, their own apartment, marriage, or the kind of independence you thought would come with time.

Some of these losses arrive all at once with a diagnosis. Others show up slowly, one year at a time, one closed door after another. You grieve the independence your child may have had. You grieve the version of their life that felt so certain when they were younger.

And these losses don't arrive in a neat order. They circle back, and they change shape as they do.

For some parents, it can feel wrong to name these things out loud. After all, your child is alive. Who are you to grieve?

But grief is not a competition. The loss of a hoped-for future is real, and it deserves to be named.

The Losses in Your Own Life

This is the part that rarely gets talked about. Your child's mental illness doesn't only reshape their future. It reshapes yours.

Maybe you imagined grandchildren. Holiday tables that grew louder and more crowded with each passing year. Maybe you and your spouse talked about traveling when the kids were grown, or downsizing to a smaller house, or finally having the kind of quiet evenings you'd been putting off for years. Maybe you pictured retirement looking a certain way.

Mental illness can take those pictures off the wall.

Instead of traveling, you're managing medications and crisis calls. Instead of quiet evenings, you're lying awake wondering if your adult child is safe. Friendships have thinned out because

it's hard to explain your life to people who don't live it. Your marriage may be carrying weight it never planned to carry.

Both things can be true. Your child is alive, and you are grieving. Your love for them is fierce, and you're also mourning the life you pictured for yourself. Holding these two things together is not selfish. It's honest.

Why This Grief Keeps Coming Back

This grief returns because the loss itself is ongoing, and every unmet milestone reopens the wound.

Researchers call this pattern chronic sorrow, a recurring grief that resurfaces whenever the gap between the life you expected and the life you have becomes visible again. It is not necessarily a sign that something is wrong with you. It is often the normal shape grief takes when the loss remains open.

The triggers are ordinary ones. A friend's news about her own child. A birthday, an anniversary, a graduation season. That is why the sorrow can return years later and still feel sharp. The grief comes back because the loss keeps showing up in new ways.

If your grief comes back, you haven't failed to heal. You haven't backslid. You're a parent who loved deeply enough to imagine a future, and that future changed. The sorrow returns because the love hasn't gone anywhere.

Can You Be in More Than One Stage of Grief at Once?

Yes. And with ambiguous loss, you almost certainly will be.

You've probably heard of the five stages of grief associated with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. What is often misunderstood is that these stages were never meant to be a staircase that everybody climbs in order. They can still be useful as a way of naming what you feel, but they are not a formula. With ambiguous loss, emotions overlap, repeat, and show up out of order.

You can be in acceptance on Tuesday and back in bargaining by Wednesday when a doctor mentions a new treatment. You can feel anger in the morning and sadness by dinner. You can also feel guilt, exhaustion, numbness, and anxiety all at the same time.

Here's what each stage can look like for a parent of a child living with mental illness:

Denial sounds like "This can't last forever" or "Maybe the doctors are wrong."

Anger sounds like, "Why my child?" or "This is not fair." Anger is not a failure of faith. It is often the sound grief makes when love has nowhere to put its pain.

Bargaining sounds like "If I pray harder, maybe God will heal them" or "If I just find the right doctor, the right treatment..."

Depression is the heaviness. The sadness that settles in your bones. The exhaustion of years of uncertainty and crisis.

Acceptance is the most misunderstood stage. It does not mean you approve of what happened or stop hoping for your child. It means you stop fighting reality long enough to have strength left for your child and for yourself. It sounds like "My child is here, and they have changed, and I can love them as they are right now."

You may move through all five in a single week. That's not instability. That's ambiguous loss doing what it does.

Lament and Hope Can Live in the Same Breath

For parents who hold faith, ambiguous loss creates a particular tension. How do you grieve something that hasn't ended? How do you hope when the situation doesn't change?

The Bible doesn't ask you to choose between grief and faith. In Psalm 13, David asks God, *"How long will you forget me?"* (Psalm 13:1 NIV). A few verses later, in the same psalm, he says, *"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation"* (Psalm 13:5 NIV). He didn't wait for the pain to pass before turning towards God. He brought both to God at the same time, the ache and the trust, and let them sit side by side.

That's what this kind of grief looks like when faith is part of your life. You don't have to resolve it. You can live in the tension.

Psalm 34:18 says that God is close to the brokenhearted. Not close to people who have finished being brokenhearted. Close to people who are in it right now. That means his presence is available to you in the middle of this grief, not only after it finally makes sense.

Faith also gives a larger frame for what you are carrying. The world is not as it should be. Because of the fall, every part of human life bears the marks of brokenness, including our bodies, our minds, our relationships, and our futures. Mental illness is one of the ways that brokenness shows up in the world.

That does not mean your child's suffering is simple or easy to explain. It does mean your pain is taking place inside a story Scripture already knows how to tell.

And hope is not built on slogans. "God has a plan" can sound cruel when your child has been struggling for years. A deeper hope says that God is still present, still wise, and still faithful even when his purposes are hidden.

More than that, hope is anchored in Christ. Jesus is not distant from grief. He is the man of sorrows. He wept at Lazarus's tomb. He entered into human suffering himself. And because he was crucified and raised, grief and death do not get the final word.

How to Begin Coping with Ambiguous Loss

Coping with ambiguous loss is less about resolving it and more about learning to carry it in a way that does not consume you. Pauline Boss has argued against the myth of closure and has instead pointed people toward resilience and learning to live with what remains unresolved.

One place to start is simply noticing where you are right now and taking one honest step. You may recognize yourself in more than one of these. Start with whichever is loudest right now.

If you're in denial, write down one true fact about your child's illness. Just one. You do not have to accept everything at once. One honest sentence can be the beginning of clarity.

If you're in anger, name what makes you mad. Say it out loud or write it down. You may be angry at the diagnosis, at the system, at your own limits, or at God. That anger is allowed. Bringing it into the light is often the beginning of understanding it.

If you're in bargaining, write a prayer of release. Name the things you have been trying to control and hand them to God, even if your hands are shaking when you do it. Think honestly about what is yours to carry and what is not.

If you're in depression, tell the truth about the heaviness. Journal it. Share it with someone safe. And if the heaviness becomes persistent hopelessness, inability to function, or thoughts of self-harm, please seek professional support. Grief can coexist with clinical depression, burnout, or trauma, and help matters.

If you're in acceptance, name three things that are true about your family right now. Not what you wish were true. What is true. Then take one step forward, whether that means reaching out to another parent, joining a support group, talking with a pastor, or finding a counselor who understands ambiguous loss.

You were never meant to carry these steps alone, and the people around you have a part in this too.

The Church Has a Role Here, Too

Because ambiguous loss does not come with obvious rituals, the church has a chance to do something beautiful. The church can help make this grief visible.

That may look like pastors who listen without rushing to explain. It may look like prayers that name mental illness honestly. It may look like meals, rides, check ins, support groups, and friendships that do not disappear when the crisis stretches on.

Families living with ambiguous loss do not need polished answers nearly as much as they need faithful presence. One of the clearest ways the church can reflect Christ is by staying near when the suffering does not quickly resolve.

Other Parents Are Carrying This Too. Community Can Help.

If something in this article put words to a grief you've been carrying in silence, you're not the only one. HBT has a community of parents who are living this same reality, parents who won't flinch when you say what you've lost or how you're feeling. It's a place to be honest, to be heard, and to sit with people who truly get it.

You don't have to have it all figured out to show up. You just have to be ready to not do this alone.

If you'd like to be part of a community that can help you process, we'd love for you to attend one of our [free monthly virtual events](#) for parents, or join our [private Facebook page](#).

If your loved one is in immediate danger or you are concerned about their safety, contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. If there is an emergency, call 911 and let the operator know your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis.

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