

Ambiguous Grief

A gentle guide for understanding and support

When someone is still here, but the relationship or life you knew has changed

Ambiguous grief can occur when there is no clear ending. A loved one may be physically present but changed by dementia, brain injury, addiction, severe illness or estrangement; alternatively someone may be physically absent without emotional closure. This uncertainty can make grief especially difficult to explain.

Understanding this kind of grief

- Without a clear ending, the mind may move repeatedly between hope and grief.
- Other people may not recognise the loss because the person is still alive or because there has been no conventional bereavement.
- You may miss who someone used to be while still loving who they are now. Both can be true.
- Creating your own ways to acknowledge change can be important when society offers no established ritual for the loss.

A gentle reminder

You do not have to prove that your grief is serious enough to deserve care. Loss is personal. What matters is the impact it has on you.

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Therapy & support that may help

Therapy is not about taking grief away or making you forget. At its best, it gives you a safe relationship in which the loss can be spoken about, understood and carried with less isolation.

Person-centred counselling - offers space for complicated and contradictory feelings.

Family therapy - can help families communicate about changing roles, care and expectations.

Carer counselling or support groups - valuable when ambiguous loss is linked with dementia or long-term illness.

Specialist addiction-family support - when addiction has altered the relationship, support for family members matters too.

You do not have to start therapy simply because you are grieving. Some people are supported well by family, friends, community, reading or peer support. Others value professional help. Cruse Bereavement Support also offers bereavement information, helpline support, groups and one-to-one support in the UK.

When to reach for more help

Consider speaking with your GP or a qualified mental-health professional if grief is making everyday life feel persistently unmanageable, you are experiencing severe or worsening distress, trauma symptoms are dominating daily life, or you are worried about your safety. If you feel you may act on thoughts of harming yourself, seek urgent help through emergency services or a crisis service.

A few things that can help between difficult waves

- Reduce expectations on the hardest days. Grief uses physical as well as emotional energy.
- Keep basic needs visible: fluids, simple food, medication, sleep routines and fresh air where possible.
- Choose one or two safe people you can be honest with rather than feeling you must explain yourself to everyone.
- Create a small ritual of remembrance or acknowledgement if that feels right for you.
- Notice triggers and anniversaries in advance and plan extra gentleness around them.
- Allow moments of laughter, interest or rest without treating them as betrayal.

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Books I would recommend exploring

Books cannot tell you how you should grieve, but sometimes another person's words help us recognise something we have not yet been able to say ourselves.

Ambiguous Loss

Pauline Boss

The foundational book on losses that have no clear resolution.

The Myth of Closure

Pauline Boss

Explores how people can live with loss without needing a neat ending.

Loving Someone Who Has Dementia

Pauline Boss

Support for the particular ambiguity experienced by dementia caregivers.

A reflection to take with you

What has changed or disappeared in this relationship, even though there has been no clear goodbye?

From me to you

Please be gentle with yourself. Grief is not a test you pass, a set of stages you complete, or evidence that you are failing to cope. Sometimes the most helpful thing we can do is make a little more room for what is already there. You are allowed to take this one day - or one hour - at a time.

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