
Ambiguous Grief

When there are no clear answers, but the loss still hurts

Living with loss that has no clean ending

Some grief arrives with a clear event and a recognised ending. Ambiguous grief is different. Something or someone can be lost while, in another sense, still being present. There may be uncertainty, unanswered questions, changing roles, hope alongside sorrow, or no moment that tells you exactly when the grieving began.

The term is closely associated with family therapist and researcher Pauline Boss, whose work on ambiguous loss describes losses that remain unclear or unresolved. This can make grief particularly exhausting because the mind keeps searching for certainty that may not be available.

Ambiguous grief can arise when a person is physically absent but psychologically present, or physically present but changed in ways that alter the relationship. It can also appear around estrangement, disappearance, dementia, serious illness, addiction, migration, relationship uncertainty, infertility, changes in identity, or other losses that do not fit a conventional bereavement story.

You can miss what was, hope for what might still be, and grieve what is happening now — all at the same time.

This guide is not about forcing closure. It is about helping you understand why uncertainty can make grief so difficult, finding ways to live with mixed emotions, protecting your wellbeing and creating enough steadiness to keep living while some questions remain unanswered.

Why uncertainty can intensify grief

Human beings naturally try to organise experience into a story: this happened, therefore this changed, and now I know what comes next. Ambiguous loss interrupts that process. When there is no definite ending, the mind may repeatedly revisit the situation, looking for new information or a different explanation.

You may feel caught between holding on and letting go. Hope can feel necessary one day and painful the next. You may wonder whether you are 'allowed' to grieve when the person is still alive, the relationship has not formally ended, or the future remains uncertain.

Two broad forms of ambiguous loss

Physically absent, psychologically present. Examples can include a missing person, estrangement, migration, separation where contact is uncertain, or someone whose whereabouts or future involvement are unknown.

Physically present, psychologically or relationally changed. This may occur with dementia, acquired brain injury, severe illness, addiction or other circumstances where the person remains physically present but the relationship, roles or sense of who they were has changed.

These categories are useful ways of understanding the experience rather than rigid boxes. Real life is often more complicated.

Why 'closure' may not be the goal

The idea of closure can imply that grief should eventually be finished and put away. With ambiguous loss, a more realistic aim may be learning to carry uncertainty without allowing it to consume every part of life. Meaning, connection, boundaries and moments of pleasure can grow even when a final answer never arrives.

The absence of certainty does not make your grief less legitimate.

What ambiguous grief can feel like

Conflicting emotions	Love and anger, hope and despair, relief and guilt can coexist.
Mental searching	You may replay conversations, check for signs, imagine possibilities or repeatedly ask 'what if?'
Frozen decisions	It can be hard to plan when part of you is waiting for the situation to change.
Isolation	Other people may not understand why you are grieving or why you cannot simply move on.
Identity changes	Roles such as partner, child, parent, carer or friend may become unclear.
Exhaustion	Living in prolonged uncertainty can place a heavy load on attention, sleep and emotional regulation.

There may be no straight line through these feelings

A new phone call, medical change, anniversary, photograph, family gathering or period of silence can alter how the loss feels. Some days you may function well; on others, uncertainty may suddenly feel overwhelming. Variation is not failure.

Permission for mixed feelings

You do not need to choose between loving someone and needing boundaries, between hoping and preparing for a different future, or between remembering who someone was and responding to who they are now. Emotional complexity is often part of ambiguous grief.

If distress becomes overwhelming, or you are struggling to keep yourself safe, seek urgent professional help. In the UK you can contact NHS 111, your GP or local urgent mental-health services; use 999 or A&E; for an immediate emergency.

Ways to live alongside uncertainty

The aim is not to pretend uncertainty is comfortable. It is to reduce the amount of your life that uncertainty is allowed to occupy.

Name what is known and what is unknown

Try two columns: 'What I know today' and 'What I do not know today'. This can help separate facts from the mind's understandable attempts to predict the future.

Create boundaries around searching

If you find yourself repeatedly checking messages, researching, replaying conversations or seeking reassurance, consider setting a defined time for necessary checking. This is not about abandoning hope; it can protect the rest of your day from becoming one continuous search for certainty.

Allow more than one truth

Try using 'and' rather than 'but': 'I love them **and** I need distance.' 'I hope things improve **and** I need to build a life today.' 'I am grateful they are here **and** I grieve what has changed.'

Keep ordinary life alive

Meals, sleep, movement, work, hobbies, friendships and small routines can feel unimportant beside a major uncertainty. In reality, they provide the structure that helps the nervous system cope with prolonged stress.

Find people who can tolerate uncertainty with you

Helpful support does not rush to solve the situation. It can sit beside unanswered questions, listen without forcing optimism, and recognise that your needs may change from one day to the next.

You are allowed to build a life around the unanswered question rather than placing your whole life inside it.

Reflection worksheet

What feels lost, even though there has been no clear ending?

What I know today

What remains uncertain

The emotion I find hardest to give myself permission to feel is...

Because... _____

What can still belong to my life?

A relationship I want to protect: _____

A routine that steadies me: _____

Something I am allowed to enjoy: _____

A boundary I need: _____

One thing I can decide today: _____

For family, friends and supporters

Ambiguous grief can be difficult to witness because supporters often want to offer certainty: 'I'm sure they'll come back', 'things will improve', 'you need to accept it', or 'at least they are still here'. Even well-intended statements can leave someone feeling that there is no room for the complexity of their experience.

What helps

Acknowledge the uncertainty. Listen without demanding a decision. Respect changing feelings. Offer practical help. Remember important dates. Ask what the person needs today rather than assuming it is the same as last week.

Words that may help

'I know there isn't an easy answer.'

'You don't have to choose one feeling.'

'I can listen without trying to fix this.'

'What would make today a little easier?'

'It makes sense that this keeps changing for you.'

Therapeutic support

Therapy can provide a place to explore grief without forcing closure. Person-centred, systemic, grief-informed, trauma-informed, acceptance-based and other approaches may be useful depending on the individual. Support should consider relationships, culture, identity, practical circumstances and the particular meaning of the loss.

Where caregiving, dementia, illness, addiction, estrangement or a missing person is involved, specialist organisations relevant to that situation may provide additional information and peer support.

Books, resources and a message from me

Recommended reading

Pauline Boss — *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Foundational work explaining why unresolved loss can be so psychologically difficult.

Pauline Boss — *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*. Explores ways of living meaningfully when certainty or conventional closure is unavailable.

Julia Samuel — *Grief Works*. A broader exploration of grief and adaptation that can sit alongside the more specific ambiguous-loss literature.

Clinical and theoretical note

Ambiguous loss is primarily associated with the work of Pauline Boss and family stress theory. It describes situations in which there is insufficient clarity about loss, presence, absence or relational roles. The concept is used across bereavement, family therapy, caregiving and trauma-informed contexts. It is a framework for understanding experience rather than a psychiatric diagnosis.

References

Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Harvard University Press.

Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*. W. W. Norton.

Boss, P. (2021). *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change*. W. W. Norton.

A message from me

One of the hardest parts of ambiguous grief is that you can feel as though you are waiting for permission to grieve. You may tell yourself that you cannot be sad because the person is still here, that you cannot move forward because something might change, or that you should know what to do before you actually have enough information.

You do not have to solve the uncertainty before you are allowed to look after yourself. You can love, miss, hope, grieve, set boundaries and keep living. None of those choices erase what matters to you.

Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy

This guide is for education and emotional support and is not a substitute for individual medical, psychological or emergency care.