

WEBINAR 3

AMBIGUOUS LOSS



Beside you through grief's journey

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WEBINAR OVERVIEW

Ambiguous loss, or Missing Persons loss, is one of the most stressful types of loss. It involves trauma, and grief, but is also a unique type of loss that involves high levels of uncertainty and unanswered questions. The goal when working with families, is not to “fix” or “cure”.

The response and uncertainty most families experience while affected by this type of loss is not abnormal. Instead, the goal is to strengthen family unity, grow resiliency, and teach families to live in the present, despite the uncertainty of not knowing if their loved one will ever return.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define the concepts of grief, anticipatory grief, and re-grief
2. Describe the different grief and healing theories
3. Understand how grief experiences differ when going through ambiguous loss



IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS:

- **Grief is a process, not a feeling.** Grief includes many feelings where one needs to adjust to a loss.
- **Anticipatory grief:** You know that a loss is going to occur, and the grieving process begins before the loss happens. Anticipatory grief does not have to be solely death related, it can occur when a child moves out of home, losing a job, losing a relationship, etc.
- **Re-grief:** The process of adjusting to a loss from a new developmental place, or from a new perspective.
- **Anger:** occurs when one of our boundaries has been crossed into territory in which we feel vulnerable
- **Guilt:** Is an uncomfortable feeling of regret, remorse, shame, and self-condemnation, which often comes when we have done or thought something which we feel is wrong or failed to do something which should have been done.
- Guilt can be legitimate, a defense mechanism, a means of control
- Characteristics of folks prone to unhealthy guilt: Low self-esteem, perfectionist, inability to let go of anger, need to be in control, inability to forgive others, tendent to depression, frequent anxiety.
- **Fear: Is a response to the belief that the future will be worse than the moment**
- Can live fear based rather than hope based.
- Fear may result in feelings of worry, anxiety, terror, paranoia, panic, dread.
- **Hope:** Our response to the belief that the future will be better than this moment.

ATTACHMENT THEORY SEPARATION BEHAVIOURS:

- Protest/Attack
- Seeking/Clinging
- Depression/Despair
- Detachment: Meaning, you can make new attachments or never make a new attachment again.
- Insecurity
- Anxiety/Avoidance
- New Attachment

FOUR TASKS OF MOURNING (WILLIAM WARDEN)

- **It is important to note that you do not complete one task and move on to the next in any particular order. Grief looks different for everyone. However, William Warden's Four Tasks of Mourning provide some insight as to what people can experience when dealing with grief.**
- Accepting the reality of the loss
- Experiencing the pain of grief: ex.) crying, feeling angry, frustration, etc.
- Adjusting to an environment in which the person is missing
- Emotionally relocating the person and move on with life

DUAL PROCESS MODEL OF GRIEF

Note: You can switch between the two processes

• **Loss Oriented:**

- Grief work
- Coping with intrusion of grief
- Breaking bonds
- Denial/ avoidance of restoration process

• **Restoration Oriented:**

- Life Changes
- New Activities
- Develop new roles, identities, and relationships
- Distraction/ denial avoidance

HOW DO WE GRIEVE AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

- Loved one is psychologically present but physically missing/or the loved one is physically present but psychologically missing.
- The greater the ambiguity the greater the depression, anxiety, and internal/external conflict.
- Denial is the most common coping mechanism which stagnates growth and freezes decision making.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS: UNRESOLVED GRIEF

- Can't identify problem to problem solve.
- Can't adjust roles or feelings to accommodate the loss.
- Others don't know how to respond to the grieving loved one or fear the situation and withdraw support.
- Relentless uncertainty results in emotional exhaustion and numbness.

INTERVENTION GUIDELINES:

- Hearing each family members perception of the loss without judgement is essential.
- It is important to hear the child's perspective.
- Every family member should understand what is going on.
- Every member of the family needs to have a voice.
- Helping the client ascertain what part of the loss can be acted upon and what cannot, is empowering.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

- Re-establish structure: Provide help as a supporter.
- Accept the temporary absence: Accept that the person is missing. This acceptance can somewhat be measured by the language that family members use/ For instance, statements such as, "When my loved one returns".
- Fill the roles of the missing person.
- Acknowledge beliefs about the status of the missing person.
- Address pain of absence, uncertainty, fear, and guilt.

IF THE PERSON HAS BEEN LOCATED:

- Re-establish structure
- Release the person that was/accept person that is
- Resolve the pain of absence, uncertainty, and fear
- Reassess the role of guilt
- Acknowledge developmental expectations
- Re-establish single perception of future

IF THE PERSON HAS BEEN LOCATED DECEASED:

- Re-establish structure.
- Replace the pain of absence and fear with grief.
- Reassess the role of guilt.
- Acknowledge “lost time” while the person was missing.
- Resolve the person that was/is/would have been contradiction.
- Establish a permanent relationship with the deceased person.

SIDE EFFECTS:

- Trust
- Perception of law enforcement
- parent’s response
- family communication
- media’s role
- reaction to current cases
- dysfunctional coping
- generational impact
- alive/dead conflict
- permission to move forward
- spirituality/meaning

POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH:

- **Positive change in:**
- Relating to others
- New possibilities
- Personal strength
- Spiritual change
- Appreciation for life/changed priorities