



Living Well With Ambiguity

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Land Acknowledgement

Every community owes its existence and vitality to generations from around the world who contributed their hopes, dreams, and energy to making the history that led to this moment. Some were brought here against their will, some were drawn to leave their distant homes in hope of a better life, and some have lived on this land for more generations than can be counted. Truth and acknowledgment are critical to building mutual respect and connection across all barriers of heritage and difference.

We begin this effort to acknowledge what has been buried by honoring the truth. We are standing on the ancestral lands of the Dakota people. We want to acknowledge the Dakota, the Ojibwe, the Ho Chunk, and the other nations of people who also called this place home. We pay respects to their elders past and present. Please take a moment to consider the treaties made by the Tribal nations that entitle non-Native people to live and work on traditional Native lands. Consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring us together here today. Please join us in uncovering such truths at any and all public events.*

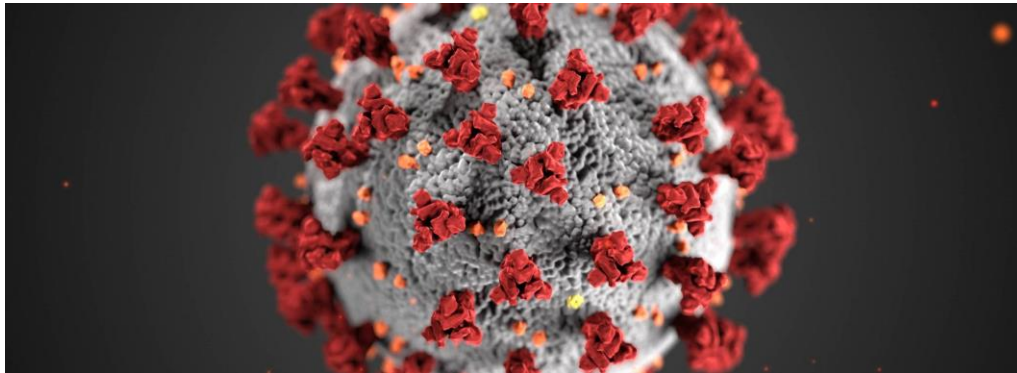
*This is the acknowledgment given in the USDAC Honor Native Land Guide – edited to reflect this space by Shannon Geshick, MTAG, Executive Director Minnesota Indian Affairs Council

Objectives

- Develop understanding of ambiguity and related stresses.
- Understand how ambiguous loss impacts individuals, families, and communities.
- Learn methods of resilience and healthy coping during uncertain times.

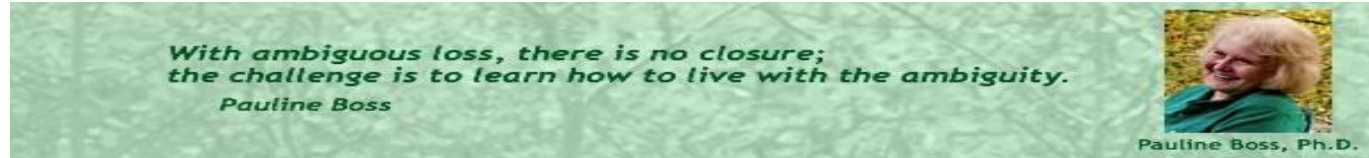


Covid-19 and Other Stressors



- The pandemic is definitely challenging our abilities to manage stress and attend to self-care, because it is so global, so big. It almost is an overarching umbrella that impacts already stressed lives. We'll keep this in mind as we talk today about how to live with the uncertainties of life when they are blown up by something like Covid or political unrest and division.

Ambiguous Loss - Background



- Theory created by Pauline Boss based on research with Native American women, wives of MIA/POW pilots in Vietnam War, and dementia. (1999)
- Provides a framework for working with situations like dementia, foster care and adoption, hoarding, military families, missing and disappeared, divorce.
- The critical question is how to live well with ambiguous loss. The question is more important than the answers.

Ambiguous Loss - What is it?

- A loss that is unclear and cannot be fixed, can be physical or psychological. Has no official verification of status as loss since final decisions have not been made.
- A loss that creates complicated grief (no resolution); the complication is due to the ambiguity not personal weakness.
- A relational condition, not individual pathology.



Two Types of Ambiguous Loss

- Type 1: Leaving Without Goodbye:
 - Physical absence with psychological presence. (Catastrophic: disappearance, kidnapping, missing in action. Common: divorce, adoption, immigration.)
- Type 2: Goodbye Without Leaving:
 - Psychological absence with physical presence. (Catastrophic: dementia, depression, hoarding. Common: loss of a dream, loss of a way of life.)

Ambiguous Loss Effects on Individuals

- Depression, anxiety, guilt, shame
- Neglect or lack of self-care
- Somatic illnesses
- Abuse: substance and other
- Distress and traumatization: “The brain does not like ambiguity and continues to struggle to make sense of it, even when dreaming.” (Boss, 3/17/12)



Interaction of Losses in Uncertainty



- Life goes on – it doesn't stop and wait for our uncertainty to end.
- While living in times of uncertainty, other losses separate from the situation will occur. These losses are defined and ambiguous.
- Layers of loss increase our stress and decrease our ability to cope in healthy ways.

Impact of Uncertainty on Family or Work Relationships

- Each person comes to the relationship with different backgrounds, experiences, beliefs and values. Uncertain times highlight the differences, and often place the differences in a negative light.
- Increased conflict between parents and children, between siblings, and within other working relationships.
- Strain on communication among individuals within a family or work group.



Ambiguous Loss Effects on Systems

- Stress: not because of weakness in the individual or family but because the situation of ambiguity is so difficult. “The ambiguity is the culprit.” (Boss, 3/17/12)
- Relationships are immobilized:
 - Decision making is put off and confused
 - Coping is blocked and grief is frozen
 - Conflict is created within families
 - Security/safety is questioned

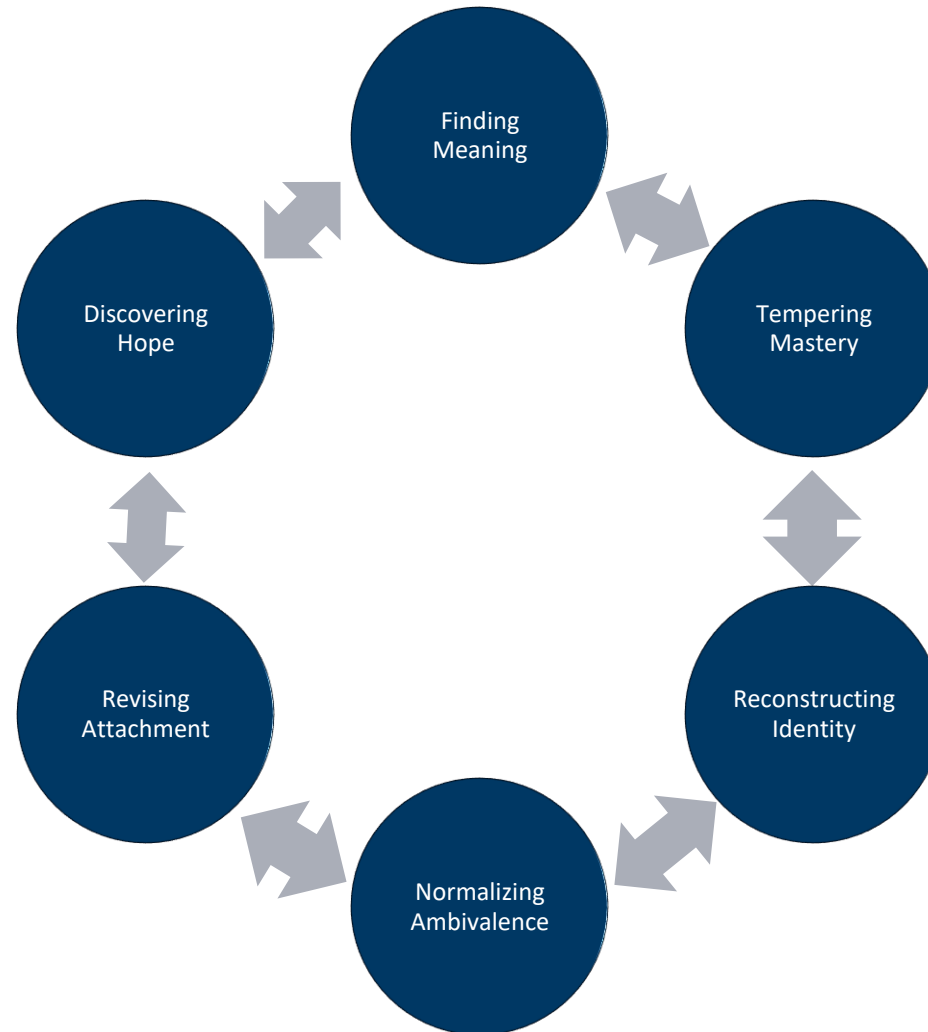


Living with Ambiguity

- Ambiguous loss is a relational condition, therapeutic goal is to encourage and support resilience.
- Paradoxical thinking can be used to increase coping: both/and thinking (harmony with) rather than either/or (mastery over).
- Closure is a myth – stop insisting on resolution to the ambiguity, and the idea that the ambiguity can be done.
- The person is normal, it is the situation which is abnormal. (Boss, 3/17/12)
- How to live well with ambiguity?



Guidelines for Resilience: *Resilience is not about bouncing back but moving forward.*



Guidelines for Resilience (not linear)

- Finding Meaning: How do I make sense of my losses?
 - What helps? Naming the problem “ambiguous loss,” using both/and thinking, spirituality, forgiveness, reshaping family rituals.
 - What hinders? Anger, desire for revenge, secrets

Guidelines for Resilience (not linear)



- Tempering Mastery: How do I learn to accept what I cannot control?
 - What helps? Recognizing the world is not always fair, externalizing blame and decreasing self-blame, mastering one's internal self (meditation, prayer, etc.).
 - What hinders? Believing that bad things only happen to bad people and the harder you work, the more you avoid suffering.

Guidelines for Resilience (not linear)

- Reconstructing Identity: How can I know who I am now?
 - What helps? Redefining couple/family boundaries: who is in, who is out, who plays what roles now. The response to sadness is social interaction. (Boss, 3/17/12)
 - What hinders? Isolation, disconnection from the society of other people.

Guidelines for Resilience (not linear)

- Normalizing Ambivalence: What can I do with the anger and guilt?
 - What helps? Normalizing the negative feelings, but not the harmful actions, seeing conflicted feelings as normal, talking with a friend or a professional.
 - What hinders? Denying ambivalent feelings about what or who is ambiguously lost.



Guidelines for Resilience (not linear)

- Revising Attachment: How can I let go without the certainty of loss?
 - What helps? Recognizing the paradox: that which is ambiguously lost is both here and gone; finding new human connections; “you will get stronger if you learn to live with suffering . . .”
• (Boss, 3/17/12)
- What hinders? Expecting clarity and closure.

Guidelines for Resilience (not linear)

- Discovering Hope: How can I find new hope when my loss remains ambiguous?
 - What helps? Becoming more comfortable with the ambiguity, finding spirituality, justice, forgiveness, laughing at absurdity.
 - What hinders? Insisting on an end to suffering, looking for closure.



Healthy Coping in Uncertainty

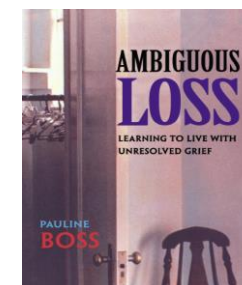
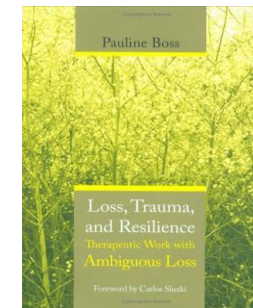
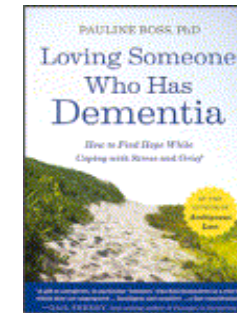
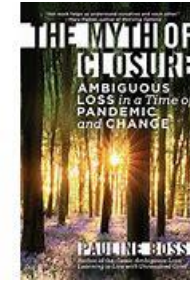
- There is not one “right” way of coping with uncertainty.
- In situations of uncertainty, we are always reaching for absolutes – we’ve got to stop this – and reach for “floating,” an ebb and flow.
- In situations of uncertainty, we are reminded that we can control only one thing: ourselves. The goal of healthy coping is not to solve the uncertain situation, but rather to create flexibility and an ability to handle the ambiguity we’re required to live in.
- Self-care: The dreaded word. The best kind of self-care is that which fits into your already busy life. What are you doing now that is unrecognized self-care?

Healthy Coping in Uncertainty (cont)

- Give yourself and each other a break.
- Look for ways to laugh more – the physiological benefits of laughter are important for our overall health.
- Deep-breathing, guided imagery, meditation, prayer, other intentional forms of relaxation which will provide space for creativity within uncertainty.
- Exercise.
- Community – don't isolate. Find people who are feeling the stress and connect – sometimes the connection will be most helpful by talking about what is happening, other times intend not to focus on the stressful situation (e.g., dinner once a month).
- Seek help – take this situation seriously.
- Change your expectations.
- Don't minimize simplicity.
- Return to what you know – what has helped in past difficult times?

Resources

- Boss, P. (2021). *The myth of closure: Ambiguous loss in a time of pandemic and change*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Co.
- Boss, P. (2011). *Loving someone who has dementia*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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Thank You!

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