Shifting From Loss to Hope: Learning Resiliency

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Pauline Boss’ Work

- Ambiguous Loss is for the lay person
- Loss, Trauma, and Resilience is for treatment providers

Wabi-Sabi

Japanese aesthetic concept where beauty is seen in the imperfect and impermanent
Ambiguous Loss

Theory first coined by Pauline Boss, PhD

“An unclear loss the defies closure... often times it does not have validation or clarification”

Knowing That You Won’t Have Clear Answers

“The human experience is never one of certainty or predictability, but with the support of caring family members, friends and neighbors, as well as the comfort that some derive from spiritual beliefs, we learn to hang on during such inevitable emotional rides.” – Boss, 1999

Leaving Without Goodbye:

What is Ambiguous Loss?

Physically absent but emotionally present

- Kidnapped children
- War
- POW/MIA
- Stillborn children
- Imprisonment
- Treatment
- Being single
- Divorce
- Infertility
- Children at college
- Military deployment
- Adoption
- Natural Disasters
- Work relocation
- Missing body
**Goodbye Without Leaving**

What is Ambiguous Loss?
- Physically present but emotionally absent
- Extramarital affairs
- Mental illness
- Addictions
- Workaholic
- Dementia
- Brain injuries
- Severe medical issues
- Children with severe disabilities
- Obsessions with Internet, gaming,
- Gender transitioning
- Autism

**ED Patients**

- Last week I was on the unit eating lunch with patients
- While eating, we played a “sharing game”
- One of the questions was “What is something that you have lost or got destroyed that you wish you had back.”
- Over half the group of patients said “My life.”

**Ambiguous Loss Theory**

**CLINICAL TIPS**
Assumptions of Ambiguous Loss

• A.L. is real even if we can’t measure it
• Life does not allow for us to see the end from the beginning, in loss, we must try to move forward without “knowing”
• Attachments can become confusing and complicated in this type of loss, especially when people are physically absent
• Our values (cultural, religious) can influence how this loss is processed

Assumptions of Ambiguous Loss

• Closure may never occur, the impact from this loss can go on for generations
• Patients cope more effectively when they understand or name the loss
• Facing the loss with honesty and hope at the same time, requires dialectical thinking
• Resiliency is found in the accepting of the loss
• Family can be seen as relational and biological
• Boss, 2016; Boss & Yeats, 2014; Boss & Carnes, 2012; Masten, 2016

Theories

• Pulls from:
  • Social Construct Theory
  • Attachment Theory
  • Family Systems Theory
  • Dialectical Behavioral Theory
  • PTSD
  • Grieving and Loss
When to Use Ambiguous Loss Theory

- Ambiguous loss is not always problematic for families:
  - The loss is seen as part of a plan or God/Allah's will
  - Families learn to live with ambiguity, seeing the loss as a positive part of the life cycle

- It is considered problematic when:
  - Decisions are put on hold
  - Other family members' needs are not attended to
  - Daily tasks are not done
  - Family rituals are cancelled
  - Psychological pain from the loss which goes unresolved or untreated

What Does Ambiguous Loss Look Like?

- Psychological symptoms include:
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Family discord
  - Grieving
  - Confusion
  - Hope
  - Hopelessness
  - Shock

“Frozen Grief”

- Uncertainty
  - How will I/my loved one recover? When? How long will it take?
  - What does being divorced mean for my future, my identity?

- Uncertain roles, rules, expectations, identity
  - Being an unmarried adult in my family of origin, I feel like I am still a child
  - If my loved one has Alzheimer’s, am I still married?

- We are frozen without awareness/support from others
  - Few rituals are done to honor ambiguous loss
  - Loss is often undefined and invalidated

- Feels never ending, no closure, goes on and on
  - Cycle of hope/hopelessness in ED Recovery
  - Put off grieving until one knows the “end”
Austin Tice

"Austin is a journalist," Marc Tice said. "He was going there so all of us could see the story, hear the story, know what it is about... The Syrians go there simply to escape the fighting and the violence. Some of our own people call the story... The Israelis go there simply to escape the fighting and the violence. Some of our own people call the story... Marc Tice added..."
Empathic Responses

Therapist:
• Be prepared for the length of the journey
• Respond with appropriate intervention for phase of change
• How is the family/individual having difficulty processing loss?
• Is there frozen grief? Trying to keep things the same?
• How does the individual/family express feelings about loss? Join them from there

Empathic Response

BASHIR: What was the family’s reaction to your post-natal depression?
DIANA: Well maybe I was the first person ever to be in this family who ever had a depression or ever openly cried in front of professionals. That was very much a shock to the family.
BASHIR: What effect did the depression have on your marriage?
DIANA: Well, it gave everybody a wonderful new label. There’s不稳定 and Diana’s mentally unbalanced. And unfairly that seems to have stuck on and off over the years.
BASHIR: I think people used it and it stuck, yes.
DIANA: Without professional help I think that it was around for a long time that you didn’t have to believe in what you were feeling yourself.
BASHIR: Diana, when you say people used it and it stuck, do you mean the family or the professional community?
DIANA: Less often, it’s probably better said family. But when you have something which is really private and you’re trying to maintain your own self, and the family label itself is, it’s not something you’re going to be talking about. And then some people who are hearing it are going to interpret it as crying wolf or attention-seeking, and they’re just warning you to be careful, can be it’s your family. I don’t think that’s a fair criticism.

Ineffective Ways of Processing Information

• Pretending you didn’t need a visit
• Believing that you have all the answers
• Withholding information that could be important
• Developing your own treatment plan
• Minimizing the medical and psychological impacts of these diagnoses

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/diana/panorama.html
Family Resiliency

Family members respond similarly?
• Be aware that different members of the family might be handling the loss differently (culture, background, religion)
• Are there family members who are struggling with their own version of the loss?
• Does expectation from family members impede the grieving process?

Is the family optimistic?
• How does the family perceive the situation in general, how have they dealt with past stress?
• What are the family traits, patterns that help get them through?

Comfort level with ambiguity?
• Who in the family is least and most tolerant of not knowing?
• Teach informed not knowing stance

Specifying Ambiguous Loss

Eating Disorder Loss

• Isolating from friends
• Checking out from life
• Leaving and delaying life goals for treatment
• Loss of role
• Loss of identity (before/after recovery)
• Loss of medical health
• Loss of friendships
• Loss of trust (in self/of others)
• Loss of sense of security
• Financial losses
Eating Disorder Loss (Family)

- Loss of time with spouse, loved one (quantity)
- Time together is impacted (quality)
- Loss of emotional and physical intimacy
- Role changes within a marriage
- Siblings lose time with parents
- Lack of trust with loved one
- Financial losses
- Unpredictable future/goals

Alzheimer’s Loss

- I feel like I am losing myself
- I am losing my support system
- I get scared when I don’t know what is going on
- I have no control over the medical condition
- I am leaving my house
- I am at the control of others for my care

Alzheimer’s Loss (Family)

- I am losing my spouse
- I lost my sexual partner
- I am losing my best friend
- Our dreams for the future are now unreachable
- Financial loss
- Placement of family member in a home/caregiver in home
- I have no control over the situation
Single and Loss

• Delayed family dreams
• Stuck role in family as a child even though adult
• Lack of partner to make decisions with
• Lack of intimacy (emotional, sexual, social)
• Friends move on and have children (“world you are locked out of”)
• Easy to blame self or think that you are at fault

Single and Loss (Family)

• Loss of dreams for grandchildren
• Seeing family member in pain
• Not knowing how to respond/fix
• Can’t control the situation your loved one is going through

Divorce and Loss

• I miss my spouse
• My spouse is not respecting my boundaries
• I am now alone in my family at holidays
• I don’t know where I fit into my ex’s family
• I feel like I should just move on
• I want to date
• I don’t want to date
Divorce and Loss (Family)

• Want family to be back together
• Not knowing how to handle holiday rituals
• How do you talk about one parent, or not talk about one parent
• Want loved one to move on
• Don’t want loved one to move on

THE SIX GUIDELINES TO SHIFTING DESPAIR TO HOPE

One: Finding Meaning

Meaning makes a great many things endurable; perhaps everything. – Carl Jung
Finding Meaning in Ambiguous Loss

Family:
- How has each person in the family created meaning in the loss
  - Something wrong with my loved one, I value this person, it is God's plan...
  - What meaning does it have for each person?
  - Remember to include everyone who is considered "family"

Clinicians:
- How does our own experience with loss or this situation impact the meaning we give to a situation?
- What meaning is the family taking from the loss?
- How does the family make modifications in rituals/rules in order to keep the meaning of the family going?
Dialectical Thinking Helps to Find Meaning

- My mind feels out of control
  - I know more about cognitive reframing than others do
  - Mastering mindfulness gives me power
- I hate that my loved one is suffering
  - I have a stronger relationship due to our journey than I would have had before
- What am I learning from this?
  - ED-I have more correct knowledge than most about nutrition
  - I am powerful because I am doing life on my own and succeeding
  - I know that I can't control life but I can control my own choices

Creating Meaning Through Rituals

- Being single
  - Having special traditions with nieces and nephews that they only do with you (late nights, treats, activities)
- New rituals in divorce families
  - New traditions with each side of the family
  - Including traditions that blend family members’ previous traditions
  - Coming up with new traditions
- New rituals in the home with Alzheimer’s
  - Have parents do some of their original roles in the family traditions but may need to modify them to help with new barriers (turkey cutting versus turkey serving)

Sacrifice for a Greater Good

- Being a mentor for others
  - I am willing to reach out to others who are going through this experience to help guide them
  - Anna Westin Act
- I am willing to suffer to help my loved one
  - I am willing to get my own therapy, I am willing to invest money, energy, compassion for their recovery journey
  - I serve those in my family who need a break
Two: Tempering (Adjusting) Mastery

"The most important predictor for resilience in the face of ambiguous loss is an individual's ability to learn how to hold two opposing ideas in their minds at the same time. Living well with ambiguity means that people have learned to live with conflicting ideas." - Boss

Tempering Mastery

Theory

- Sense of control over your life
- How much control do you need in your life to manage your life in your way?
- Too much mastery
- Too little mastery
- Find ways to let go of blame and to hold onto power

Tempering Mastery Guidelines

- Bad things happen to good people
- Good things happen to bad people
- Bad and good things happen to all people
- Avoid thinking/language of "deserving"
- Accept life's challenges, change what you can
- Be cautious to blame oneself or others
- Be vulnerable, ask for help
- You have been through hard times when you haven't been able to control things before
- Don't be paralyzed in decision making
Mastery, Support, & Vulnerability

• Give family homework that turns them towards each other and avoids splitting
• Therapeutic alliance should help the patient/family turn towards treatment team
• Turn towards others who have gone through it

“Why would you want to go through it alone?”

Managing and Making Decisions

• You can’t make all your decisions yourself
• Find ways to keep your cup full, ongoing loss can drain you
• Self-care, respect your own limits
• Get opinions from your support team and professionals before making your decisions

Acceptance, Positive Attitude and Mastering the Inner Self

• If I accept that this is my situation, I can move forward
• I can conquer anything
• I am a fighter
• I will see the good in my situation
• I can choose to seek ways to find calmness in my life
• I am mindful about my emotions
• I feel emotions without judgment
• I won’t let loss “win”
Single and Mastery

• I can’t control the viable options available to me.
• I can control how often I “put” myself out there.
• I can manage the relationships I do have.
• I can’t control the judgments of others.

Divorce and Mastery

• I have to let go of what I can’t control
  – Unexpected drop ins by kids or ex
  – Ex’s new dating situations
  – Kids of new boyfriend/girlfriend
  – Different rules at ex’s house
  – What ex says about you to others
• I try to make and keep healthy boundaries in your world/home
  – Kids aren’t “go-betweens”
  – Rules in your home can be enforced

Eating Disorders and Mastery

• I can learn to reach out and share my feelings with others
• I can trust my body that it knows what it is doing
• I can’t control what my “set point” is
• I can trust that things will get better
• I don’t always get to control which emotions come into my heart
“The marvelous thing about a good question is that it shapes our identity as much by the asking as it does by the answering.”

David Whyte

Three: Reconstructing Identity

Reconstructing Identity and Ambiguous Loss

- We define ourselves in a context with others
- If we lose others or our role then we might feel a loss of sense of self
- Others might not want to adapt to a new role with the loss or recovery from loss
- Feelings of uncertainty, doubt, insecurity can prevail as we reform our identity
- Different than depression

Reconstructing Identity with Self

- How does being divorced, being single, having an ED change who I feel I am?
  - Am I my loss?
  - Who am I due to this loss?
  - What payoff does this loss give me?
  - How would I be different if my life wasn’t touched by this loss?
  - How would you describe yourself on a date, a co-worker, a fellow student?
Identity Do’s

• Recognize who you used to be, who are now, who you want to be
• Recognize family patterns of strength and resiliency
• Identify personal strengths
• Expand family roles
• Create new family rules
• Increase your spiritual sense of self
• Separate from your diagnosis as your identity
• Identify with positive symbols of recovery

Identity Don’ts

• Stop any familial or support system bias or discrimination
• Give up old patterns in the family that don’t serve
• Don’t isolate from others, you need community for confidence and for sense of who you are
• Don’t keep yourself in a role that isn’t working
  • I am the rescuer
  • I am the food police
  • I am the fun one
  • I am the family member that is the caretaker

Reconstructing Identity with Others

• How does my “loss” change how my relationships develop?
  – How am I different in my marriage?
  – How do I act in my dating life?
  – How does my relationship with my siblings change with my loss?
  – How does my family respond to me when I am feeling loss?
Reconstructing Identity with Community

• How does my community respond to someone who has experienced my loss?
  – Our society values thinness
  – Do people judge you on your divorce, singlehood?
  – Do I get support from others, do people shy away from talking to me about the loss?
  – Do I have equal social rites as others who don’t experience my loss?

Four: Normalizing Ambivalence

- It’s hard not to be proud of her for losing so much weight…

Normalizing Ambivalence

- Other lens on experience: feelings of hopefulness that things will work out and feelings of anger, sadness or regret can happen at the same time.
- Normalizing Ambivalence: if new roles and rules aren’t made due to feelings of ambivalence
  – Reach out to others who have been there to discuss how to support the balances
- There is a way to deal with a loss or change in a way that might seem conflicting: by expressing and acknowledging our wars and the ambivalent feelings we experience.
- There are helpful interventions to bring us balance:
  – Drug or alcohol feelings to be balanced
  – Talk about what’s going on
  – Medication
  – Wise mind
Examples of Ambivalence

• Who am I without my ED?
• Do I want to get married (again)?
• I like being single because ___________
• I enjoy the safety of my ED because_______?
• I feel scared to change!
• I feel scared to stay where I am at!
• I enjoy spending time with my loved one and I miss who they “were”

Normalizing Ambivalence

Goals in Therapy:
– Acknowledge the level of stress in the family
– Expect for family distress to increase during periods of loss
– Teach patients to increase ability to tolerate emotional discomfort
  • DBT skills such as WISHLIST, IMPROVE, UTSPR
  • ASK/SFF can help with this
– As we listen to each other’s story, acknowledge different experiences with same loss
  • Someone else can feel differently than me

Normalizing Ambivalence

Goals in Therapy:
– Teach communication skills to family members
– Avoid judgments
  • I am frustrated but I won’t put blame on or denigrate others
  • Listening decreases shame around the emotions surrounding the loss
– Find proactive and healthy ways of acting
  • Reflect on keeping a mental balance
– Uncover your own feelings with loss and realize that they may be present
Attachment: “...when a relationship to a special loved person is endangered, we are not only anxious but are usually angry as well. As responses to the risk of loss, anxiety and anger go hand in hand.” Bowlby

- Building strong and supportive friendships can intensify resiliency
- Disconnect from those who don’t support
- Fight the urge to disconnect with your loved one with an ED
- Allow treatment team to support you
- Fall in love with the loved one you do have
- Bond with those who have been there
- “How do you think a loved one would advise you to do deal with this...”

Revising Attachment Guideline

- Thinking dialectically
  - You can be irritated, annoyed, frustrated, burnt out and love, enjoy, and appreciate the patient/loved one at the same time
- Shifting from sadness to power
  - Identifying with your new role and be proactive
- Think about how the system can improve
  - Understand sequencing in the family system
Revising Attachment Guidelines

• Remember the “others”
  – I have other children, there are others who need your help and love
• Group therapy
  – Provides accountability
  – Provides support from those who have been there
• Fight the fantasy
  – Radically accept reality, acknowledge the difficulties and be open to moving forward
• Create ceremonies
  – New rituals that acknowledge loss and acknowledge what you have

Example: Revising Attachment Single

• Be an “Involved Auntie”
• Develop your friendships, connections with friends can be like family
• Do you lower your expectations?
• Is the reality that there are less viable options for dating?

Ex: Revising Attachment ED

• Love the body that you/loved one has in recovery
• Learn new rituals that can help you feel closer, go grocery shopping and cook together
• Learn to push ED out of the relationship by choosing loved one where ED comes in
• Learn to communicate out loud your feelings of shame with support team
Ex: Revising Attachment and Divorce

- I am now a co-parent with the ex, what are my goals?
- What role and boundaries do need to keep to make sure that I am emotionally divorced but emotionally available to everyone in the family?
- How can we redefine our family by creating new rituals which reflect our love and connection?

Six: Discovering Hope

Hope “is not the conviction that something will turn out well (for me), but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” Victor Havel

“Injecting Hope”

“I’ve currently got a year left in paramedic school. So I found something that I am passionate about, that I get up every day fighting for...I love it, and I love the fact that I have a goal, and something to do, and something I need my senses for. Which is a reason I guess for me to not do it [omit inslin]. My senses are critical to how well I can take care of patients, and so that’s been huge for me. That I’m not necessarily doing it [just] for myself. –Molly

(Goebel-Fabbri, 2017)
Spirituality

I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time—waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God—it changes me. -C.S. Lewis

• In embracing spirituality we can learn that we can't control life
• Ask yourself, your clients, the families if they believe it is acceptable to be angry with God

Hope vs Hopelessness

• Hope brings us possibilities that life can change, we can change
• When we tell our story we feel less alone
• Switch from "why..." to "what am I going to do..."
• Find meaning, create new rituals
• We get better at taking risks, seeing the silver lining
• We could give up hope for recovery, then we live with a definitive loss

Increasing Hope

• Humor
  – Allows us to experience loss and pain in a powerful way
• Imagining Possibilities
  – Creating new opportunities in the current situation
• Developing Patience
  – Be ok with knowing that things can improve but it's the process that is the journey, not the end point
References


References

• Jackson, J. (2017). Treating ambiguous loss in adults who are single. Brigham Young University, Annual Continued Education Event, hosted by Brigham Young University Marriage and Family Therapy Department.