



# Living with Ambiguity

Supporting young people experiencing non-death loss and its effects on mental health

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**Wediko**  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES

# Objectives

am•big•u•ous

doubtful, uncertain,  
unclear in meaning

- Define ambiguous loss and explore current theory.
- Introduce specific strategies to work with students who are experiencing ambiguous loss in a school setting.
- Explore our own experiences of ambiguous loss.



# Ambiguous Loss

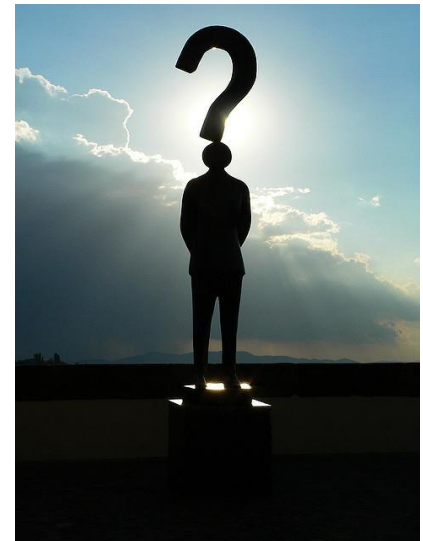
Even without death, students can grieve.

# What is it?

- A loss that remains unclear.
- Physical or psychological experiences of families that are not as concrete or identifiable as traditional losses such as death.
- Loss of a person, object, an experience or an event.
- Types (according to Pauline Boss):
  - **Type One** occurs when there is physical absence and psychological presence.
    - When a loved one is absent, incarcerated, deported or missing in war
  - **Type Two**, there is physical presence and psychological absence.
    - When a loved one suffers from dementia, substance abuse, autism, depression and/or other forms of mental illness
    - Can also occur if a loved one identifies as LGBTQ or after someone moves to another culture, community, country, etc.

# How is this different?

- There is no verification of death or no certainty that the person will come back or return to the way they used to be.
- Lack of information of the person's whereabouts.
- On-going situation with no closure.
- Ambiguity can freeze the grieving process.
- Oftentimes, there are no rituals where family and friends come together to grieve the loss.



# Why is this important?

- Magnitude of students impacted by ambiguous loss is huge!
  - Lack the awareness and insight of the ways ambiguous loss can cause distress (from students, their families, and the helping adults)
- Maladaptive coping strategies and behavioral problems in schools.
- Research- some that focuses on young people
  - ELL
  - Raised by grandparents
  - Parental deployment
  - Parental detention and deportation (huge increase this year given political climate!)
  - Need more!

# What do we know?

- Ambiguous loss leaves a person searching for answers, struggling to manage the uncertainty, and thus complicates and delays the process of grieving and often results in unresolved grief (Boss, 2006).
- Experiencing unresolved grief can put children and adolescents at greater risk for depression, physical and/or mental illness, and increased drug and/or alcohol use (Lenhardt & McCourt, 2000).
- This gets played out at school... students are more frequently late, absent, unable to access learning, have behavioral problems, etc.
  - Research shows this for death loss, no research for ambiguous loss.
  - If we can address ambiguous loss head on, we may be able to avoid symptoms of unresolved grief.

# So how do we help?

- Finding Meaning
- Tempering Mastery
- Reconstructing Identity
- Normalizing Ambivalence
- Revising Attachment
- Discovering Hope

Pauline Boss, "Loss, Trauma, and Resilience"  
Therapeutic goals for grieving





# Resiliency

What can this look like?

# Wediko's Living with Loss

- 8 week peer group
- Facilitated in school-based settings
- Groups have included students who have experienced death loss and/or ambiguous loss
- Student MUST identify the experience as a loss
- Requires some psycho-ed during intake

During the 2015-16 school year, 71 students participated in LWL groups.

50% Black

42% Latino

7% White

1% American Indian

Almost 100% eligible for free or reduced lunch.

56% male, 43% female, 1% transgender

Pre-group surveys indicated that 52% of students identified death loss, 48% non-death loss for reason for participating in group.

## Finding Meaning

Being able to make sense of an event or situation.



## Role of Facilitator:

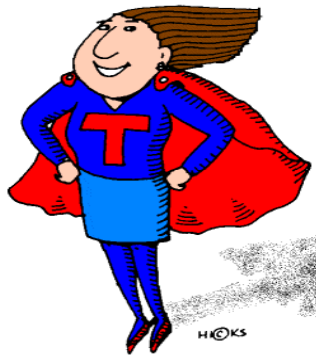
- Social interactions helps create meaning.
- Talk about loss(es) through narratives, pictures, songs, poems, etc. with the group.
- Provide psycho-ed about ambiguous loss.
- Label the problem as 'ambiguity.'
- Reframe negative situations.
- Can't take away pain from loss but can help change the relationship with the loss to make it more meaningful and hopeful.
- The students' responses provide an opportunity for the adult to view how the students perceive the meaning of the loss.

# Finding Meaning: Activity

- Both/And approach
- Sheet of paper, divided in half, line down center
- One side: parts that have been lost; Other side: parts that are still present
- Square in center: parts that sometimes fit both categories and/or don't make sense or have a place on the page.
- Discussion related to how to make sense of the information in each box and how to use that information to honor the loss.

## Tempering Mastery

Wanting a sense of control and understanding that the ambiguity of our loss is something we don't have control over.



## Role of Facilitator:

- Identify that loss(es) and ambiguity are not the students' fault.
- Help students understand world isn't fair; some parts of their lives are out of their control.
- Allow students to make choices.
- Reduce self-blame and externalize that blame to something else ("ambiguity").
- Identify areas of past competency as well as areas in the students' lives where they can experience mastery and success in the present.

# Tempering Mastery: Activity

- Ask students to think about the loss and the experience of not having control.
- Write those feelings on separate sticky notes and place the sticky notes on some part of their body.
- Together, the group can look around at what others have written.
- \*Lead group through breathing exercise\*
- Students then pull off sticky notes and throw them away.
- Purpose: physically pull off/out all of the negative feelings they may be experiencing.

## Reconstructing Identity

When loved ones are physically or psychologically absent, loved ones become more confused about their identities.

### Role of Facilitator:

- Create a group space where students are able to reflect on who is part of their family and how roles have changed.
- Psychological family is especially important (does not have to be biological family only); be sure to acknowledge this in the group.
- Look at sense of self and changing families in a more positive way.
- Avoid blaming and shaming.

# Reconstructing Identity: Activity

- Ask students to write a two act script.
- The first act will depict a scene when the student's loved one was physically and mentally present and the second will depict a scene when the loved one was physically and/or mentally absent. The scene should reflect how the student's role has changed.
- The group will work together to act out both scenes.
- Allows for the student to think about and act out their lived experience. It also allows for the group members to participate and give feedback about what they are experiencing and observing.



## Normalizing Ambivalence

Ambiguous loss can create conflicted feelings and emotions.

### Role of Facilitator:

- Label the problem- ambiguous loss- and identify areas in which the students may be feeling ambiguity.
- Help students recognize and label conflicted feelings while encouraging students to use coping skills in these moments.
- Normalize the ambiguity and conflicted feelings.
- You can't get rid of the ambiguity but you can bring it into recognition, thus making it more understandable and manageable.
- Development of coping tools.

# Normalizing Ambivalence: Activity

- After talking about ambiguity, ask students to draw out what comes up for them. Once something has been drawn, ask the students to label it (a feelings label) and then rate it on an intensity scale.
- Discussion focuses on overall picture, why that picture brings up a particular feeling for them, and why they chose that specific intensity.

## Revising Attachment

Finding acceptance for the new situation, and working to develop new, different relationships or attachments.

### Role of Facilitator:

-To help students get to the point where they can say, “I’m still attached to the person, but I now need to adjust my relationship given the circumstances of ambiguity and lack of resolution.”

-Psycho-ed and patience are helpful! Working with ambiguous loss can take longer than typical grief work.

-Both/and thinking helps

-Labeling the change in the relationship can be a powerful intervention in itself .

# Revising Attachment: Activity

- Develop memorial ceremonies and/or rituals to honor and remember the person or attachment that has been lost.
- Allow group members to share what they've learned in group with the larger community.
- Empower students to share what they have learned while honoring lived experiences and forging new relationships and attachments moving forward.

## Discovering Hope

Without hope, there is no meaning. Without meaning, there is no hope.

### Role of Facilitator:

- To discover hope is to embrace ambiguity and then find meaning in it.
- Hold a space for group members to share and reflect on how they understand ambiguity, its role in the grief journey, and how they believe they can move forward through their loss(es).
- Keep an open door policy for participants.
- Normalize needing support in an on-going basis... at each new developmental level, as the ambiguous loss situation changes, etc.

# Discovering Hope: Activity

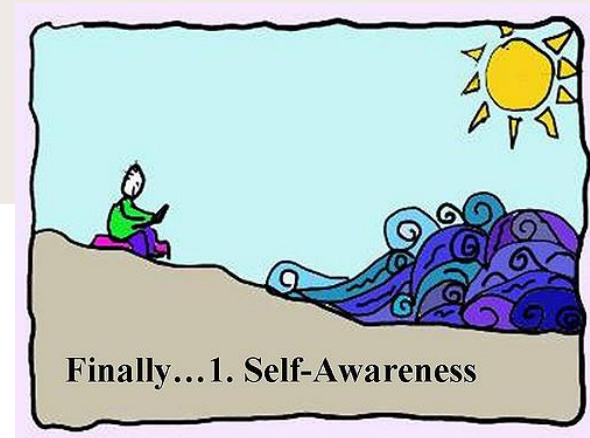
- Letter writing, the lighting of candles, and other rituals that can be used to honor the loss and can help establish hope and meaning for students.
- Decoration of bracelets, rocks, jewelry or other physical items can be used to help students move forward with their hopes after the group ends.



# Self Awareness

How does this affect us as providers? We start the work here.

# Self Awareness



Before we start supporting students around their loss(es) we have to be aware of what our own loss(es) mean to us.

- What is my experience with ambiguous loss?
- Do I think about my ambiguous losses? How do I react?
- Is this the first time my loss(es) has been labeled as ambiguous? How does that feel?
- How do I react when someone discusses an ambiguous loss?



# Large Group Reflection

- Share way you can use today's workshop in your work moving forward.

# Thank you!

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