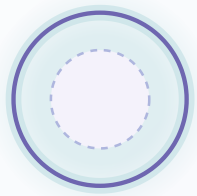
Ambiguous Loss

Grieving someone who is still here, or still somewhere

Some losses come without a clear ending. Family therapist and researcher Pauline Boss described *ambiguous loss* as a loss that remains unclear: a person may be physically absent but still very present in our minds, or physically present but no longer able to be with us in the way they were (Boss, 1999). Ambiguous loss is not a mental health diagnosis. It describes a painful situation, and the grief that can come with it.

TWO KINDS OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

physically present · *psychologically present*



PHYSICALLY ABSENT

Gone, but still here

absent in body, present in mind and heart

"My son left after an argument three years ago. I don't know where he is, and I think of him every day."

or



PSYCHOLOGICALLY ABSENT

Here, but gone

present in body, changed in mind or connection

"Since his brain injury, my husband is home with me, but much of the person I knew feels out of reach."

Both are real losses. What makes them ambiguous is that the question "are they here, or are they gone?" has no clear answer.

01 Why it can feel so hard

the difficulty lies in the situation, not in you

NO CERTAINTY

No clear ending

Without knowing whether the loss is final, it can be hard to begin grieving, or to know what to hope for.

"Should I be grieving, or still hoping?"

LITTLE RECOGNITION

Few rituals or support

There is no funeral or shared mourning, and others may not see it as a loss at all.

"People say, 'At least she's still alive.'"

GRIEF ON HOLD

Grief can feel stuck

Boss described grief that becomes "frozen", unable to move forward because the loss stays unresolved.

"I feel stuck in between."

CHANGING ROLES

Where do I stand now?

Roles and relationships can blur, and it may be unclear where you now stand.

"Am I still a wife, or now a carer?"

02 Some gentle reminders

what research and clinical work suggest

This is a recognised kind of loss

Grieving someone who is still alive is understandable. It has a name, and many others experience it.

Mixed feelings are common

Love alongside anger, guilt or even relief is a normal response to an unclear loss (Boss, 2006).

It is not a personal failing

Distress here can resemble depression or prolonged grief, but it often reflects the unclear situation itself (Boss & Yeats, 2014).

Closure may not come, and that's okay

The aim is not to find an ending, but to live meaningfully alongside the uncertainty (Boss, 2022).

03 Both/and thinking

letting two things be true at the same time

My father is still alive, **and** *I am grieving him.*

My partner no longer remembers our past, **and** *he still enjoys our walks together.*

I hope my sister gets in touch, **and** *I am building a full life now.*

I love my brother, **and** *I am worn down by his addiction.*

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Boss proposed six guidelines for living with ambiguous loss: finding meaning, adjusting mastery (a sense of control), reconstructing identity, normalising ambivalence, revising attachment and discovering new hope. They are not stages to complete in order; people tend to move between them over time (Boss, 2006). The next page offers space to reflect on your own situation.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.

Holding What Remains

Only write what feels manageable; you can return to this at any time

04 My situation

in your own words

Who am I grieving, and what has changed? · *a person, a relationship, or a future I expected*

Which feels closest? · *tick any*

- ○ *gone, but still here*
- ○ *here, but gone*
- ○ *a little of both*

05 What has been lost, and what remains

both columns can be true

What I miss or have lost
for example, our conversations

What is still here
for example, shared memories

06 My both/and statements

two truths, side by side

_____ *and* _____

_____ *and* _____

_____ *and* _____

07 Six ways through, gently

0 = not yet · 10 = this feels possible

GUIDELINE (BOSS, 2006)	WHERE I AM NOW	ONE SMALL STEP, IF ANY
Finding meaning *making some sense of what is happening*	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Adjusting control *accepting what I cannot change*	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Rebuilding identity *who I am now, as roles shift*	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Accepting mixed feelings *allowing love and hurt together*	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Revising attachment *keeping what remains of our bond*	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Discovering new hope *hope that may look different now*	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	

08 A way to honour this loss

a ritual can mark what has no ceremony

Something I could do · *for example, writing a letter*

People who understand, or could · *for example, a support group*

09 Reflection

what am I noticing?

One kind thing I can say to myself about this

To remember, or to bring to a session
if you're working with someone

A note on care. Ambiguous loss can be long and tiring. If it ever feels overwhelming, you don't have to carry it alone: reach out to someone you trust, your GP or a mental health professional.

SOURCES 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 & Company. · Boss, P. (2022). *The myth of closure: Ambiguous loss in a time of pandemic and change.* W. W. Norton & Company. · Boss, P., & Yeats, J. R. (2014). Ambiguous loss: A complicated type of grief when loved ones disappear. *Bereavement Care, 33*(2), 63–69.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.