

Creating Space for Grief

Dr. Kate Watson

Agenda

- 10 min: Introductions
- 15 min: Overview of grief, in general
- 20 min: Complicated Grief, Disenfranchised Grief
- 25 min: Ambiguous Loss
- 10 min: Building Resilience with Clients
- 10 min: Resources, Q&A, Wrap Up

About Grief and Loss

- People can experience feelings of grief any time there is a loss.
 - Death (includes friends, family members, pets, miscarriages)
 - Divorce or break up
 - Job loss
 - End of a family tradition
 - Loss of a previously held belief, faith
 - Ending substance use/ addiction
 - Loss of mobility, health
 - Loss of a dream or goal that now seems impossible
 - Loss of safety/ security
 - Loss of status

Introduction to Grief

- Grief is a highly individual process and doesn't follow a linear path.
- It's often described in terms of stages, like denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. However, not everyone experiences all of these stages, and they don't necessarily occur in a specific order.

Kubler-Ross Model

1. **Denial:** A sense of shock or disbelief, difficulty accepting the loss.
2. **Anger:** Feelings of frustration, resentment, or questioning “why” the loss occurred.
3. **Bargaining:** Attempts to make deals (often with a higher power) to reverse or lessen the pain.
4. **Depression:** Deep sadness, isolation, or withdrawal from daily life.
5. **Acceptance:** Coming to terms with the loss and finding ways to move forward.

A dark gray arrow pointing to the right, containing the text "Listen to Elizabeth McElroy".

Listen to
Elizabeth
McElroy



Complicated Grief

- Complicated grief (also called prolonged grief) is a form of intense, persistent, and debilitating grief that does not ease over time (usually more than 6 months).
- Ongoing, heightened state of mourning that does not ease over time.

Complicated Grief, Culture, and Community

- What role might culture play in the experience and expression of complicated grief? How might cultural expectations shape the grieving process and influence the need for support?
- How can workplaces, communities, and families create environments that reduce the risk of complicated grief?

Disenfranchised Grief

- Disenfranchised grief is a type of grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned.
- The term was coined by grief researcher Kenneth Doka in 1989 to describe losses that society does not recognize as significant or worthy of mourning.
- Because the loss is not fully acknowledged, those grieving may feel isolated, unsupported, or unable to express their emotions.

Disenfranchised Grief

1. Losses That Are Not Recognized as Significant

1. Death of an ex-partner or estranged family member
2. Loss of a pet
3. Miscarriage, stillbirth, or infertility struggles
4. Loss of a friendship
5. Ending an abusive relationship

2. Grievers Who Are Not Considered Legitimate

1. LGBTQ+ partners in non-recognized relationships
2. Stepparents, co-workers, or distant relatives
3. Caregivers mourning a patient they were emotionally attached to
4. Foster parents who have to say goodbye to a child who was in their care

3. Circumstances That Carry Stigma or Judgment

1. Death by suicide, overdose, or criminal activity
2. Grieving a person who caused harm (e.g., an abusive parent)
3. Loss due to incarceration or deportation

How does **DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF** come up in your work?

Definition of Ambiguous Loss

- Ambiguous Loss:
 - Refers to a type of loss that occurs when a person experiences a sense of loss without clear closure or understanding. In ambiguous loss, the absence or loss of someone or something is uncertain or unclear, making it difficult to define, accept, or process.
 - Examples: A loved one is lost/ kidnapped, a friend has “ghosted” or stopped communicating without explanation, divorce/ break up, Alzheimer’s diagnosis, etc.

Types of Ambiguous Loss

- Type I:
 - This type involves a **physical absence** with **psychological presence**. Examples include situations where a loved one is missing, such as in cases of kidnapping, disappearance, or military deployment. While the person is physically gone, their psychological or emotional presence remains, causing confusion and unresolved grief.
- Type II:
 - In this type, there is a **physical presence** with **psychological absence**. It occurs when a person is physically present but psychologically or emotionally unavailable due to conditions such as dementia, addiction, severe mental illness, or brain injury. The person may be there physically, but their essential qualities or connections have changed or diminished.

More examples (see descriptions on handout)

Type I (physically gone, emotionally present)	Type II (physically present, emotionally absent)
Missing Persons	Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia
Military Deployment	Divorce or Separation
“Ghosting” or other forms of disappearance	Chronic Illness
Migrant Workers Separated from Families	Addiction
Child separated from family of birth	Terminal Illness
Child removed from foster care	Having a neglectful parent
	Visitation with a parent who hasn't been a significant figure in one's life

More about Ambiguous Loss

- Ambiguous loss can create unique and complex challenges for individuals and families.
- It's difficult to do the “work” of grieving when it isn't clear what you need to grieve, or if there is anything to grieve at all.

Discussion Questions

- If you're comfortable sharing, discuss a time when you have experienced ambiguous loss in your life.
- What makes ambiguous loss unique, compared to other kinds of grief? Put it into your own words.
- How does this come up for your clients/ families?
- What do professionals/ practitioners need to know about ambiguous loss? What do they need to do to help their clients?

Strategies for Clients and Families

1. Acknowledge and Validate Feelings Associated with Grief
2. Seek Support
3. Educate/ Be Informed
4. Focus on Self-Care
5. Journaling
6. Mindfulness/ Meditation
7. Rituals
8. Stay hopeful and realistic

Discussion Questions

- What strategies have you found helpful when working with people around grief and loss?
- What is our role in supporting them?
- What are some misconceptions about grief that we should be aware of in our work?
- What are some common countertransference issues that could arise while supporting clients through grief?

Resources

- Books:
 - *Disenfranchised Grief* by Renee Blocker Turner
 - *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* by Pauline Boss
 - *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change* by Nancy Berns
 - *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* by Francis Weller (on audible, as well)
 - *Living with Loss, One Day at a Time: A Memoir of Grief and Recovery* by Rachel Blythe Kodanaz
 - Several books by David Kessler
- Podcast: *All There Is* with Anderson Cooper
- Therapist: Elizabeth “Biz” McElroy <https://www.elizabeth-mcelroy.com/>
- Websites:
 - www.AmbiguousLoss.com
 - www.Grief.com

Stay In Touch

- Dr. Kate Watson
- Kate@AdvocacyAcademy.org
- www.AdvocacyAcademy.org
- @AdvoKateW