

UMN family therapist Q&A: Grieving the losses amid coronavirus pandemic

By [Mary Divine](#) | mdivine@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press
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The measures taken to curtail the spread of the coronavirus have been drastic, massive and immediate. Life as we knew it has been completely upended.

Family therapist and psychologist Pauline Boss, professor emeritus in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, is an expert in loss, trauma and resilience. [Boss coined the term “ambiguous loss”](#) to name the reality that not every loss has an immediate resolution.

“What is distressing us is not just the virus, but the ambiguity surrounding it, what it will do, and what we should do about it,” said Boss, the author of “Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief.” “Science provides some answers, but we are experiencing uncertainty, and that’s very stressful for a society that is accustomed to solving problems and having definitive answers.”

In a phone interview with the Pioneer Press, Boss talked about the coronavirus, coping strategies and lessons learned from 9/11. The transcript is edited for clarity and conciseness.

Question: I think the whole idea of ambiguous loss pertains to so many experiences with COVID-19. How can defining our losses help us navigate this time?

Answer: You can’t cope with something unless you know what the problem is. It’s not just the virus and the medical dangers and all of those things that we know about and hear about on the news. What we hear less about is the ambiguity and the losses that are occurring — and I’m not talking just about the deaths; I’m talking about college students not having a chance to say goodbye to their friends because they were sent home so quickly or not having a graduation ceremony, a major milestone for a high-school and a college student. And businesses, well-run businesses, that are having to shut down because they are asked to, but also because they can’t afford to continue. People who take good care of their health are now also being struck down, so it’s illogical. Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs that doesn’t make sense in the usual way.

Q: How can one cope with a pandemic?

A: A pandemic is abnormal. For the majority of us, our reaction to this is normal. We’re scared, afraid, confused, sometimes even angry. People cope with it differently. The first step is: Try to shift your thinking from absolute thinking — “It’s terrible ... we’re going to die ... I can’t cope with this” — to “It’s a terrible stress right now, and I can learn to be more resilient because of it.” It’s those “both/and” statements that will help to lower the stress in people facing ambiguous loss. “I am both afraid, and I am glad to be home with my children or my partner unlike at any

other time.” If you said one or the other side of that equation — “It’s awful, it’s the end of the world,” or “It’s fine, I can do this just fine,” neither one of those are absolutely authentic right now. The “both/and” statement is closest to the truth we can get — and because it is authentic, it actually helps to calm us now.

Q: My college student has had to come home. High-school seniors are missing sports seasons, proms, graduations. How can we adjust to the new reality and build something good out of these losses?

A: Young people have a right to be grieving. They may just be sad or angry and not know why. They have experienced ambiguous loss. They lost those important rituals. I think they still need to say goodbye to their friends, but it may be virtual now. I really encourage that. They also need to know — again, identify what the stressor is, so you can cope with it — they need to know that they have had a loss. It’s not a death, but it’s an ambiguous loss. We need to normalize that for them. It’s OK to be sad right now, but try also to reconnect with your friends virtually. Don’t stay in your room alone. Don’t isolate.

Q: But how do you grieve what is essentially a small loss — like my son’s loss of a semester on campus — in the midst of much greater suffering?

A: I would not call that a small loss. My grandson said he was able to have some “small goodbyes” before he left campus, which I thought was a good use of that term. They weren’t the big celebrations that they would have had. I tend not to label anybody’s loss as big or small, but they will remember them for the rest of their lives — like my father remembered having the flu in 1918, or the years of the deadly polio epidemic when my little brother died. These are epidemic periods that will not be forgotten. It’s important for families to add something to the memory that is positive and fun — the people driving by singing “Happy Birthday” or having a party or a wedding in a way that nobody ever had a wedding before. Family celebrations have to take place, but you’re going to have to be creative about it. My grandson’s graduation ceremony is canceled, so we will have to do something here. We have to balance their memory of uncertainty and fright ... with something fun.

Q: What can we learn from the people who have dealt with ambiguous loss the best?

A: They are resilient, but they have a way of finding meaning in a chaotic situation. I find that extraordinary. This does not happen overnight, and it happens better in the company of other people going through the same kind of ambiguous loss. People who are resilient have a story of what happened — “this was an awful time, and I felt devastated” — but as time goes on, the story changes. Again this “both/and.” “It was an awful time, but I also learned something.” I heard one young person say, “This is terrible ... my things are still at my college ... I had to leave so fast,” but he said, “It’s not so bad ... there are greater things to worry about.”

Q: How can we handle the stress and anxiety?

A: It helps us if we know what the problem is. What is bothering us is the not knowing, the unanswered questions and the uncertainty of it all. You look on the TV, and you hear conflicting

reviews. Scientists don't have all the answers yet. That's uncomfortable for us. What I recommend that we all do is find something we can control and master, because right now we cannot control what is happening outside. The virus is in control right now, so find something at home you can control, something that makes you feel satisfied: cooking, playing an instrument, exercise, writing. What this does is it gives you a feeling of more power in a situation where we are pretty helpless right now.

Q: The uncertainty and unanswered questions surrounding COVID-19 make it that much worse. Why?

A: It makes us so anxious because we are a culture that is more mastery-oriented. We are good at solving problems, at fixing things, but this one came so fast and so furious that we haven't gotten there yet. This is a great time of terrible uncertainty and anxiety. We're not good at unanswered questions because we're pretty successful at solving problems. I mean, we actually did put a man on the moon and a rover on Mars. We're accustomed to solving problems and solving them fast.

Q: You say that the grief of ambiguous loss is distinct from traditional grief. How is it different?

A: Well, for one, there's no official certification of the loss. There are no community rituals to support your grief. There is no Hallmark card for what is happening now to many of these people — people who are losing their businesses, young people who are sent home from college without saying goodbye or, in fact, never having that graduation they wanted. We are going to have to do some makeup work, but it requires creativity and imagination. We won't be able to make it all up. There still will be loss. But rituals help, and the usual rituals that come with a verified loss are not here.

Q: Tell me about your work after 9/11 and how the lessons learned from that experience could help us now.

A: I was called in to New York City specifically because I worked with families of missing persons. There was a pregnant woman whose husband was missing, and she kept saying, "It's my fault he's missing." He always got up earlier to go into the Trade Center — he usually got in by 8 and was out by 9 — but because the alarm clock didn't go off, he overslept. He was in the tower just as the airplane hit. She said, "I should have awakened him, and I didn't." She was devastated. About a year later, she said to me, "Do you remember that story I told you about my husband oversleeping, and how it was my fault that he was in the tower when it was hit?" ... She said, "I see it differently now. It has a different meaning for me now. He always set his own alarm clock. I never did. I think he wanted another hour to be with us before he died." Now, that's the transformation of perception of a tragedy that we are looking for.