

**CASA CONFERENCE**  
**March 2010**

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**AMBIGUOUS LOSS**

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**A POEM**

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It's hard to see tomorrow  
When someone you love is gone.  
And its harder still to realize  
that your life will still go on

**THE CHALLENGE**



- Of all losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is most devastating because it is:
  - Unclear and unrecognized
  - Indeterminate
  - Most distressing
  - Immobilizing – can't problem-solve because they do not know if loss is final or temporary
  - Lacks resolution or closure

**TWO KINDS**



- Physically absent, but psychologically present such as foster care – parent viewed as physically absent but psychologically present
- Physically present, but psychologically or emotionally absent, such as neglect

*- Pauline Boss, Ambiguous Loss, 1999*

**COMPLEX LOSS**

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- Loss effects all aspects of life, including learning
- It is often acted out with unsafe/unacceptable behaviors
- It is often diagnosed as psychopathology such as ODD, ADHD, depression and RAD



**EXPLAINING PAIN IN THE PHANTOM LIMB**

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- Something is missing but not sure what
- There is nothing obvious that is causing the pain or discomfort
- It happened in the past, why does it still hurt?
- I thought I was over it
- What am I supposed to be "over"?

## THE GOAL

- Unresolved separation will often interfere with the development of new attachments
- Lack of resolution will impact sense of well being and healing



## WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

- The feelings are undefined and unclear
- It is a restlessness and discomfiture that defies explanation or words
- You look for something you can't recall misplacing
- You don't know when it "went missing"
- You feel a little bit crazy



## I DON'T FIT IN

- Loss of belonging, looking like others, talking like others
- Kids want to be like everyone else
- Loss of birth order: who is oldest, biggest, strongest, cutest, smartest?
- Do I belong here?



## LOSS OF JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS

- Things are not fair
- I don't understand how this happened
- My sister got to stay
- They adopted my two brothers but not me
- I hardly get visits
- People don't really tell me the truth



## I AM NOT NORMAL

- Normal kids don't feel this way
- Normal kids do not have a GAL or Worker
- I have appointments that other kids don't
- I seem to be the problem
- I pretend to laugh and to be happy, but it is just an act
- I lay awake and worry a lot
- Bedtime scares me

## I'M NOT GOOD AT ANYTHING

- Loss of competence
- Loss confidence
- Loss of capacity to compete, to be challenged, to feel smart
- Fear of taking on new tasks or trying something different



## LOSS OF JOY



- I just want to be left alone
- I thought I would feel better than this
- There is nothing to really look forward to
- The things I want the most are unreachable
- I can't relax enough to play

## LOSS OF TRUST

- I am not sure they mean it when they say it
- Mostly, adults do not do what they say
- I better not let down my guard
- I have to keep looking over my shoulder to see what it coming or who is talking about me
- I am bossy and controlling because I have to count on myself

## LOSS OF INNOCENCE

- I was never carefree
- I have always worried
- I know things about what grownups do that other kids don't know
- I have had stuff happen that people do not know about
- I learned what a "virgin" was today at school

## LOSS OF CHILDHOOD

- Summer vacation at the cabin
- A special overnight with Grandma
- A special surprise on my golden birthday
- The new bike I always wanted
- The marks on the doorframe that show how much I grew this year
- I wish I could be little again, I don't act my age

## LOSS OF PEACE

- Something bad is probably going to happen
- Bad things happen and I can't control them
- My body aches a lot, I often feel sick
- I need to know what everybody else is doing
- I can't assume that my mom or dad will know what to do next



## WHERE IS MY DOG?

I had a favorite dog. He got hurt once. He used to sleep in my room and play with me. I was his favorite. I worry that no one feeds him now, because that was my job. I wonder if they kept him.



## I LOVED THAT TEACHER

My 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher was so nice to me. She used to let me help her at recess instead of making me go outside with the other kids. She sometimes gave me a chocolate kiss or sucker when I helped her. She always smiled at me and never got really mad when I forgot my homework. She was going to teach me how to write cursive, but then I moved.



## THE FOOD IS WEIRD

My grandmother used to cook fried chicken that was so good. We also used to get chocolate milk at bedtime. We don't get that here, because my mom says it is not healthy. I guess my grandma did not care about healthy. I sure do miss her.



## HOW BIG WAS I?

My foster brother and mom were talking about who was the biggest baby when she had them. I do not know how big I was or what hospital I was born in. I am not sure who drove my mom to the hospital. I am not sure if she was glad to have me, or if she counted my fingers and toes, or had a party when I came home.



## LOSS OF HUMOR

- I can't take a joke
- I can't read between the lines
- I can't pick up on the unspoken message
- I can't tell the difference between sarcasm and sincerity – I'm defensive
- I don't get the inside jokes
- Their jokes make fun of people like me
- I can't remember how to laugh



## SHARED HISTORY

- I am not in any of the stories they tell of past holidays
- I have nothing to tell that they were a part of
- My story did not seem to follow me here and they do not seem to care
- I don't share their secrets (and I'm not telling mine!)
- I am not in their pictures from last summer

## WHO IS GOD?

- They make me go to a church that I don't like
- I used to go to church and pray
- I don't believe in God anymore
- The other kids in Sunday School know the story and I feel stupid
- I guess my parents were sinners



## LOSS OF HOPE

- We call this depression
- It is something children can experience at every developmental age, including infancy



## LOSS OF FUTURE PLANS

- What is going to happen next?
- Where will I be?
- What sports can I try out for?
- What is temporary?
- What is forever?



## AMBIGUOUS BEHAVIORS

- Strong feelings that range from confusion to anger and sadness, with no conscious awareness of why these feelings exist
- Lack words or skills to identify or express the feelings
- These feelings are projected onto others



## LOSS OF LEARNING

- Inconsistent academic achievement can be caused by grieving or fantasizing - concentration is broken
- The child has poor focus
- The child's lack of continuity in school has impaired their progress and they are not at grade level
- They were 'flunked'
- FASD



## TROUBLE WITH TRANSITIONS

- The field trip makes me nervous
- I hate substitute teachers
- I don't want to go to respite
- The other kids don't fight going to bed
- Why do I hate school?
- What if I am not smart enough for school next year?
- The slightest change feels overwhelming

## SCHOOL PROBLEMS



- I don't know my family tree
- I don't have any baby pictures
- Who do I look like, which features are inherited, recessive genes etc...
- What did I do this summer with my family?
- Where was I born?
- What is my racial background?

## MEDICAL HISTORY

- I had to have a bunch of shots when I moved here, but I just had shots before I moved last time
- I don't know if I had the measles or not
- I am the only one in the family who can't drink milk



## HOLIDAYS



- I don't have any money to buy something
- I am not sure where to send the card I made for Mother's Day
- I call her Carol, not Mom
- There is a father/daughter dinner after the game. Should I ask?
- I hate surprises
- The real kids all got 50 bucks from Grandpa

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY?



- Yeah, sure. Happy huh?
- Is my real mom thinking of me?
- Does she miss me?
- Does my dad ever wish he could see me?
- They would get me something great, if I was with them
- I wonder why they didn't call?

## COPING

- Loss must be expressed
- We must name this grief
- Children need their experience to be acknowledged
- They must have a way to understand it



## FOUR TASKS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL GRIEF WORK

- Understanding
- Grieving
- Commemorating
- Going on

- Maria Tozzi, *Talking with Children about Loss*, 1999

## UNDERSTANDING

- Knowing what caused the loss and why it happened
- Knowing what happened to the person who left, and why
- Knowing how they fit in, did they cause it, could they have prevented it, did they influence it



## GRIEVING



- Experiencing the painful feelings
- Demonstrating the loss with words, behaviors, feelings, play, questions, stories, conflict, worries, fears, music
- Grief needs to be shared – someone safe must be with them while they do this work

## COMMEMORATING



- Remembering the people, places or things that are no longer part of the child's daily life
- Building rituals of expression
- Finding ways to remember and shape the memory in meaningful ways
- Pictures, symbols, stories, objects, activities

## GOING FORWARD

- The child learns that the pain of grief subsides
- The child gains confidence that they can cope
- The child finds ways to express and externalize
- The child can anticipate times of sadness and have a plan to cope
- The child learns to tell another story that includes their legacy and takes it into the future

## INFLUENCING FACTORS FOR COPING

- Previous attachment relationships
- Number of moves and losses
- Developmental age and insults such as trauma, abuse, neglect and prenatal exposure
- Temperament of child
- Cognitive ability
- Coping strategies for dealing with stress

## THERAPY

- Find and tell the truth, name the losses, list them, make a real time line, concrete, pictures and dates
- Listen to the child's version
- It is EMDR, Play, multi sensory, includes the caregiver, uses third person and narrative



## SUPPORT THE CAREGIVER

- Explain the child's experience to caregivers
- Help them understand the core underlying emotions that drive the behaviors
- Recognize the child is coping the best they can, and is not "choosing" to be difficult
- Help the parent attend to their own losses
- Adoptive parents may have limited awareness of their own ambiguous losses

## HEALING



- The child needs to feel safe enough to express grief
- The child needs the opportunity to feel vulnerable
- The child needs patience and compassion – angry parents can't help kids heal
- Punishments for the grieving child only increase their distress and lack of competence

## THERE IS NO HALLMARK CARD

- Finding a way to paint the picture, tell the story and to make real the ambiguous feelings of past loss is hard work
- Children do heal, but they need solid support, affirmation, and the compassion that you bring to your work relationships, each and every day
- Walk in their shoes and see with their eyes



## THANK YOU!

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