

ADOPTIVE PARENT SUPPORT

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



UNDERSTANDING AMBIGUOUS LOSS: NAVIGATING
THE COMPLEX EMOTIONS OF ADOPTION



What's Inside ?

10 WAYS TO OFFER SUPPORT WHEN YOU LACK ANSWERS



Watch

Adoptee Soho Ethridge narrates her origin story and personal experiences with grief and ambiguous loss. Her powerful testimony puts words to the deep feelings she has about her adoption.



Read

In this article, psychologist Kate Murphy explains ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief, and uncertainty. She provides thoughts on how to work through these challenges and what may help with unresolved feelings.



Listen

In this podcast, "On Being with Krista Tripett", the host speaks with Professor Pauline Boss who introduced "ambiguous loss" in her 1999 book of that title. Together they talk through this concept and how it impacts us.

- 1 Be present & listen actively
- 2 Acknowledge feelings
- 3 Encourage open dialogue
- 4 Be patient
- 5 Give voice to the ambiguity
- 6 Get support from professionals
- 7 Practice empathy
- 8 Check in regularly
- 9 Validate curiosity
- 10 Encourage self-expression



A MESSAGE TO PARENTS

Intercountry adoption in North America began as a response to the devastation of World War II, initially facilitating the relocation of children from European orphanages to North America. Since the 1990s, this practice has expanded significantly on a global scale. The U.S. Department of State estimates that over 254,000 children have been adopted into American families since 1999.

In 1992, China opened its doors to international adoptions, allowing over 160,000 children to find families worldwide, nearly half of whom were adopted by U.S. families. For many years, China's adoption program was the largest in the world. However, in September, China announced a dramatic shift: it will no longer permit international adoptions, with exceptions only for relatives. This decision has sent shockwaves through the adoption community, impacting families currently in the adoption process and those who have already finalized their adoptions. As a result, many Chinese adoptees are grappling with a tumultuous mix of emotions, including devastation, relief, confusion, and concern. Questions abound regarding visa eligibility, access to adoption files, the fate of children remaining in orphanages, and the implications for birth family searches.

While these pressing concerns weigh heavily on the minds of Chinese adoptees today, the nature of adoption itself often entails **ambiguous loss and unanswerable questions**. Many adoptees have little to no information about their birth families or personal histories, and it may become increasingly difficult to uncover this information in the future. Ambiguous loss can be challenging to navigate, as it often involves unresolved questions about identity, belonging, and the connections to their origins. For international adoptees, the experience of loss can extend beyond family, encompassing loss of country, culture, and heritage.

For parents, one of the most challenging aspects is supporting their children amidst this uncertainty. It can be paralyzing when you're unsure how to help someone navigate their grief. We recognize the heavy burden you carry as you seek to provide clarity and comfort during this turbulent time. This October newsletter aims to support you, the caregivers of affected adoptees, equipping you with resources and insights to help support your children with a possible sense of loss. Although recent events have brought these issues to the forefront, the theme of unanswerable questions is a persistent reality in the global adoption community.

“

I would describe [ambiguous loss] as an invisible wound, one that constantly itches and every single time you get close to finding that gnawing itch, you'll never fully be able to reach it.

–Soho Ethridge, Adoptee

”

What is

AMBIGUOUS LOSS?

“Ambiguous loss occurs in two situations: when a person is physically present but psychologically unavailable, or when a person is physically absent but psychologically present. The latter type is most common in foster care and adoption.

As Pauline Boss suggests, “the greater the ambiguity surrounding one’s loss, the more difficult it is to master and the greater one’s depression, anxiety, and family conflict.” This holds true for the following reasons:

It is hard to resolve grief when one does not know if the loss is temporary or permanent.

Children in foster care, and even some in adoptive families, often feel great ambivalence about accepting a new family when there is even the slightest chance the birth family may still reclaim them.

Uncertainty about losses prevents children from easily reorganizing roles & relationships in their family.

Children who served as their younger siblings’ caregiver in the birth family, for instance, can find it exceedingly hard to relinquish that role in a new family. In fact, separation from the birth family may make a child even more determined to fulfill the task of caring for her siblings.

Clear, symbolic rituals do not mark adoption losses.

Society recognizes death through funeral ceremonies, but there is no somber equivalent to observe losses caused by separation from the birth family. Knowing that a parent or birth siblings are still somewhere out there can be confusing and anxiety-inducing for foster and adopted children. Will they run into members of their birth family by accident? Will their parents or siblings contact them someday?

The lost relationship is not socially acknowledged or is hidden from others.

For adoptive families and their relatives and friends, an adoption is cause for celebration. Children who are adopted, however, may feel confused or guilty about expressing happiness over being legally disconnected from their birth family. Extended family members and members of the community may not fully appreciate that adoption is directly tied to losing one’s birth family.

Others negatively perceive the circumstances that led to the loss.

When children are removed from families in which they are neglected or abused and placed with adoptive families, many believe that the children are being rescued. Children, however, even when parents mistreat them, often feel a fierce loyalty to their birth families. After all, life with the birth family may be all they know. It is familiar.”

Ambiguous Loss

HELPING CHILDREN COPE

Give voice to the ambiguity.

Label the ambiguous loss and acknowledge how difficult it is to live in ambiguity.

Allow grieving.

Adopted children need to be given permission to grieve the loss of their family of origin without feeling guilty.

Don't expect grief to be "cured".

Explain that feelings will come and go at different times in life & provide a safe space for those feelings.

Redefine what it means to be a family.

Family can have diffuse boundaries and may include many different types of people.

Identify the loss.

Work to learn what losses the child is grieving rather than assuming.

Learn which events trigger the loss.

Family events may be difficult. Alter or add to family rituals to acknowledge important people.

Be mindful of trauma.

Transitions can be difficult and trigger feelings of loss. Discuss what change means to the child.

Honor what was lost.

Allow for time to revisit the losses and support the child with acceptance and love.

Be honest.

It is ok if you don't know. Support and validation is not contingent on being able to answer questions.

Adoption Loss and Grief

Short Article

Psychologist Kate Murphy explains that while ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief are not easy to deal with and are almost always a part of the adoption experience, coping is easier with support. [Read here...](#)

How I've Come to Understand Loss

11 minute video

A unique type of trauma, ambiguous loss can leave a person without emotional closure or with unresolved grief. Chinese adoptee Soho Ethridge discusses her journey through grief and loss. [Watch here...](#)

Navigating Loss Without Closure

50 Minute Podcast

This conversation with Pauline Boss is full of practical intelligence for shedding assumptions about how we should be feeling and acting in the face of loss, especially without closure. [Listen here...](#)



IMPACT OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS ON CAREGIVERS

Unclear Boundaries

The nature of adoption creates ambiguous boundaries around family membership, where caregivers may feel conflicted about their role in relation to the child's birth family, leading to emotional uncertainty and difficulty establishing a secure sense of family identity.

Guilt & Self-Doubt

Caregivers may experience guilt for feeling sad about the child's birth family loss, questioning if they are "good enough" parents, especially when the child may express longing for their biological family.

Difficulty with Closure

Due to the lack of clarity around the birth family situation, caregivers may struggle to achieve closure on the loss, leading to ongoing grief and emotional turmoil.

Social Isolation

Caregivers may feel hesitant to share their experiences with others who might not understand the complexities of adoption, leading to social isolation and a lack of support.

Impact on the Child-Parent Relationship

The caregiver's own unresolved feelings about the ambiguous loss can sometimes negatively impact their ability to fully connect with and support the adopted child.

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Need additional support? Contact our post adoption team!



THE PARK
ADOPTION COMMUNITY CENTER