

Views from VanDeWalle

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Ambiguous Loss & Farming

Picture this scenario. A young farmer in his thirties is looking forward to taking over the family farm someday. Suddenly the father is impacted by a life-changing health incident that leaves him mentally incapacitated and unable to explain the workings of the farm or other advice for the son. Or... imagine being the wife who no longer has the same husband she once knew. While the farmer is still living and physically healthy, he is at a much lower-functioning cognitive level. So many feelings will run through the family. Feelings of anger, guilt, frustration, sadness, and the list goes on. Even after 5-10 years of that life-changing event, the family is still dealing with missing that person they once knew. Society might tell us to “move on” or that one should better understand how to cope in that setting, however this family is dealing with a loss. It is the loss of the person they once knew and is coined ambiguous loss.

According to Dr. Pauline Boss, University of Minnesota Emeritus Professor, “Ambiguous loss differs from ordinary loss in that there is no verification of death or no certainty that the person will come back or return to the way they used to be.” There are two types of ambiguous loss.

- Type One: Occurs when there is physical absence with psychological presence. This includes situations when a loved one is physically missing or bodily gone. Catastrophic examples of physical ambiguous loss include kidnapping and missing bodies due to war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and natural disasters such as earthquake, flood, and tsunami. More common examples of physical ambiguous loss are divorce, adoption, and loss of physical contact with family and friends because of immigration.
- Type Two: Occurs when there is psychological absence with physical presence. In this second type of ambiguous loss, a loved one is psychologically absent—that is, emotionally or cognitively gone or missing. Such ambiguous loss occurs from Alzheimer's disease and other dementias; traumatic brain injury; addiction, depression, or other chronic mental or physical illnesses that take away a loved one's mind or memory. Psychological ambiguous losses can also result from obsessions or preoccupations with losses that never make sense, e.g., some suicides or infant deaths.

Ambiguous loss theory has long been used to support family therapy in cases such as terminal illnesses and children leaving home. However, ambiguous loss also has many applications to families in the farming industry. In the changing farm and rural landscape, loss of land, livestock, changing markets, and even relationships can be ambiguous losses that lead many to feel “stuck.” Naming the ambiguous loss and using strategies to work through it can help farm families move forward.

In my earlier example, there is a psychological absence with the physical presence that the family must understand and process. In type one, this could be from the event of a natural disaster which we see quite often in agriculture. Other types of loss include a sense of identity. If a farmer or rancher who is so closely tied to the land/livestock suddenly is not engaged in the operation, that can leave them with a sense of sadness. After all, his/her whole identity had been tied to that farm or ranch. This provides implications that in a family farm going through



transition, help that older farmer with continued involvement on the farm. Allow that person to serve as a coach or mentor or ask what jobs, he might be capable of still assisting.

I recently completed a training for this program and hope to provide more information and resources to Nebraska once our team is assembled. For more information on ambiguous loss, go to <https://www.ambiguousloss.com/>.

(Source: University of Minnesota Extension)