



Identifying and Grieving Ambiguous Loss When Our Child Is Struggling with Substances

As a parent of a child struggling with substances, we're used to identifying feelings of fear, anger, sadness, and guilt. However, we don't always identify the grief we feel.

There are many types of loss that cause grief. **Ambiguous loss** is when the person we're grieving is still physically present but emotionally unavailable for a relationship or we're estranged from them.

When a person is struggling with substances they often aren't as emotionally available as they were before and that can lead to drastic changes in our relationship with them. If their substance use continues for a long time or escalates there are more layers of loss as we continue to watch their life change in ways not ever imagined. We can easily lose the dream about what we expected to experience as their parent, our dreams for their life, our identity as a "good parent", our sense of safety and security, and our close relationship with them.

This can be incredibly painful and every part of us can resist the reality of what is happening. In an effort to relieve our pain, we can desperately try to force the relationship we used to have and the life we dreamed about. In this vicious cycle our child can pull even further away.

One of the crucial parts of personal healing and recovery may be to grieve the loss of the relationship we used to have with our child and the loss of our dreams for both our futures. Acknowledging our disappointment, unfulfilled expectations, and the profound sense of loss we experience is healthy. It's also good for our relationship with our child. It relieves the pressure we might put on them to be someone they can't be right now.

If you think you are grieving **ambiguous loss**, here are some healing steps you can take:

- **Acknowledge your feeling of loss:** Recognize and accept that you are experiencing a feeling of significant loss. Allow yourself to fully acknowledge the reality of the situation and the impact it has on your life. Give yourself permission to feel whatever comes up without judgment.
- **Experience and express emotions:** Allow yourself to experience a range of emotions, such as sadness, anger, guilt, confusion, or whatever comes up. It's important to give yourself permission to feel these emotions without judgment or suppressing them. You hurt because you care and that's okay.
- **Seek support:** Reach out to friends, family members, therapists, coaches, or support groups who understand your situation. Sharing your feelings and experiences with others who have gone through similar circumstances can provide relief.
- **Allow time for healing:** Understand that this feeling of loss takes time and that healing occurs at its own pace. Be patient and gentle with yourself as you allow yourself to process the loss at your own speed. Don't put expectations or timelines on your feelings of loss because everyone's journey is unique.
- **Take care of yourself:** Self-care is essential to your physical and emotional health. Start with your most basic needs like sleep, water, moving your body, deep breathing, and nutritious food.

- **Adjust to a new reality:** Embrace your resilience and ability to adapt. Over time, you will begin to adjust and accept your current reality. This might involve making changes in your role as a parent, changing your relationship with your child, and educating yourself about substance use.

Just like recovery, grieving isn't a linear process. You might move back and forth between conflicting emotions. Be patient, kind, and compassionate with yourself as you navigate your feeling of loss.

Material adapted from:

https://heatherrosscoaching.com/identifying-ambiguous-grief-when-your-child-is-struggling-with-substances/?fbclid=IwAR2LC-Sj_TNCPvxNBQCXRxvIh_VBlifKdof3FCcamB_gbHjBgy8A5HjGc0Y