Ambiguous Loss & Vicarious Trauma

10/6/2015 “It’s Been a Minute”
“Ambiguous loss is the most stressful kind of loss. It defies resolution and creates long term confusion.”

— Pauline Boss, PhD.
Traits of Ambiguous Loss

- Traumatic
- Unclear
- Senseless
- Lacks “Closure”
- Not Reconciled
Physical Absence, Psychological Presence

- Missing, Disappeared, Kidnapped
- Incarcerated
- Deployed, Captured
- Infertile
- Termination of Pregnancy
- Death of an Ex-Spouse
- Adoption
Psychological Absence, Physical Presence

- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Coma
- Dementia
- Addiction
- Autism
- Depression
- Divorce
I don't think I will ever be okay again.
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Some knowledge by and understanding from society and Western culture.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS
Lack of knowledge about the nature of ambiguous loss and its impact.
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Lower tolerance to ambiguity.
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Legitimized & validated by society.

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Everyone shows low tolerance to the ambiguity.

NOT legitimized & validated by society.
Disenfranchised Grief

• Perinatal Losses
• Incarceration
• Suicide
• Job Loss
• Family Alienation
• Loss of an Animal Companion
• Relocation
• Phantom Losses
• Multiple & Serial Losses
“I mean I’m right there, in the middle of the room, and people just ignore me!”
“The Zeigarnik Effect”

Named after a Russian psychologist who watched waiters in a restaurant. They never forgot orders that had NOT been filled.
“Attachment Injury”
Prone to recall negative, unfinished emotional experiences more vividly than positive ones.
Unresolved pain is like a backdrop, a subtext, a news-ticker at the bottom of the screen, setting off triggers that remind us of the trauma.
“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

--- William Faulkner
It Is All Shattered Glass

I am a figure of glass on a glass mantel, attached to a glass wall, in a glass house, located within a glass community. A part of a glass country, which is located on glass earth. The delivery is made and a small crack begins to spread, and all the glass is breaking. All is in shambles. One of the parts left is large enough to rise, in order to walk, eat, talk, cry, and sleep, but it is all shattered glass.

--- Doug Daher
It is disconcerting to see the world going on as if nothing has happened.
Ego-Illusions Get Shattered:

“I can maintain control over life events.”
“I have the ability to fix what goes wrong.”
“I am invulnerable to depression.”
“My faith is exceptional.”
In Other Words ... 

Life stories are profoundly disrupted.

Next chapters do not unfold as anticipated.

Familiar ties (family, friends, community) are threatened, weakened, or broken.
“Grief does not keep to a schedule. It is a timeless, nonlinear progression of emotions that rises and falls.”

– Dr. Joanne Cacciatore
Physical Impacts:

- Diabetes
- COPD
- Heart Disease
- High Blood Pressure
- Obesity
- Cancer
- Liver Disease
- Gynecologic Disorders
- Sexually Transmitted Diseases
- Unintended Pregnancies
Psychological Impact:

• Avoid Services (Until Things Get Very Bad)
• Resist or Refuse Specific Protocols
• Overuse Services
• Misuse Medications
• Negative Engagement
Vulnerable Patients...

- Agonize over changes
- Become easily overwhelmed
- Cope poorly with everyday losses
- Move on slowly from disappointments
- Get stuck in “learned helplessness”
- Cycle Between Depression <-> Anxiety
- Harbor Deep-Seated Feelings of Guilt
- Express Frequent “Confusion”
- Often Seek Validation of Feelings
- Exhibit Chronic Exhaustion
- Seem Unable to “Move On”
- Hesitate to Invest in Getting Better
NO SHOOTING
WITHIN
CITY LIMITS

S.D.M.C. 53.10

CITY OF SAN DIEGO

10/6/2015  “It’s Been a Minute”
Remain Aware of “Triggers”

- Sights
- Sounds
- Smells
- Procedures
- Exposure
- Touch
- Power
- Gender
- Position
- Privacy
Tune In to Their World:

- Imagine What They’ve Been Through
- Give Them Time to Trust You
- Offer Unhurried Attention
- Make Room for Voice and Choice
- Affirm Any and Every Concern
- If Needed, Include a Support Person
- Always Explain and Get Consent
- Ask If Ready
- Encourage Questions
- Remain Respectful, Kind and Honest
Express Empathy:

“I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“No one has a right to do that to a person”

“That must have been quite upsetting.”

“We know these kind of experiences can impact health. Have you ever explored that?”
As healers, we can’t help taking on some of their emotional pain.
"How do **YOU** do it?"

How do **YOU** cope with the pain and suffering of others day in and day out?

How do **YOU** "turn off" your work when you go home?

Do **YOU** let go of the terrible things you see and hear in your work?
WORK-LIFE-BALANCE

BURNOUT
Call It What You Will:

- Vicarious Trauma
- Empathic Strain
- Secondary Victimization
- Compassion Fatigue
- Brown Out / Burn Out
- Counter-Transference
Engage in Self-Care:

• Recognize When You’re Being “Triggered”

• Extend to Self the Care You Show Others

• Debrief After an Intense Encounter

• View Seeking Peer Support as a Sign of Strength
“We are all as angels with only one wing. We can only fly when we embrace each other.”

-- Luciano de Crescenzo
Ask Yourself: “Am I …”

• Building rapport?
• Sharing control?
• Respecting boundaries?
• Balancing efficiency with compassion?
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
The Good News …

It is not happening now.
The trauma is over.
It’s in the past.
You are now in the present.
The Good News …

You are safe.
You are worthy of care.
You deserve protection.
The Good News …

You are not naturally toxic. Feelings cannot hurt you.
The Good News …

Whatever you’ve experienced and had to do to survive, you’re a good, strong person who has much to offer.
The Good News …

You have a future.
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