

Every grief experience is unique to the individual. There is no universal grief experience to deem certain reactions normal and others abnormal. One of the Grief Summit videos talked about the ambiguous losses suffered in a narcissistic relationship. It's interesting to see how loss and freedom can go hand-in-hand in such a situation. When one deeply desires freedom from something or someone and even acts to willingly create the necessary change to free oneself, she can still feel the loss of that object, experience, person, or connection. Even in a relationship that puts one through a cycle of abuse, manipulation, and gaslighting, he or she can feel a sense of loss when saying goodbye to such a toxic relationship.

Change of any kind is risky and intimidating, which is often the reason why people remain in abusive relationships despite being mistreated or "knowing better." However, significant change is necessary to end the abusive cycle. The loss takes place through that change — in attitude, dynamic, status, or circumstance. Without a clearcut death loss, survivors can struggle with the ambiguous nature of the loss because the lost person still lives in the same world yet the relationship as they knew it is no longer there. Especially once people truly observe the narcissistic abuse, they cannot unsee it. The attitude and perspective may almost immediately shift and thus the process of addressing the ambiguous loss begins.

Oftentimes individuals can be resistant to processing and mourning the loss because grief makes it more real and final and requires true acceptance that may trigger repressed anger. Some survivors even describe their abusive loved ones as an idealized, "bigger than life" way and refuse to acknowledge the negative characteristics. In a clinical environment, it can be helpful to employ both/and thinking where the client can acknowledge two conflicting ideas: there was real love and care existing in the relationship, and there was also an exploitation of that love, attention and generosity.

In this ambiguous loss, people must grieve the past, present, and future. In addition to mourning the loss of the past relationship and carrying out the necessary changes in the present, the individual also experiences the loss of a better future they had hoped for. Once change comes and brings finality to the manipulative dynamic, one's hope for a miracle that would change his or her loved one is gone. When the present changes, it redirects the course of one's life including any future they imagined with the abuser. Because the person genuinely loves and cares for the other person, he or she wants to hold onto an idealized version of what they could be. Grieving the loss of that dream is difficult no matter how much "better off" they are.

I acknowledge the challenge of dealing with ambiguous losses in counseling. As a clinician, I must help my clients learn to be okay with the ambiguity and paradox at times rather than force it to make sense. No grief experience looks the same – the job requires me to have empathy and understanding for those mourning a clearly toxic situation and even their resistance to accept the loss and begin their healing process. Every person's journey is unique and can take many twists and turns over long periods of time. I have not experienced many significant death losses in my life but have gone through my share of ambiguous and disenfranchised losses. It is my goal as a therapist to offer a safe space where clients are encouraged and allowed to feel justified in grieving all types of losses, including non-death, ambiguous losses.

We also watched a presentation on mother loss and how it impacts a person's attachments, identity, and place in the world. Maternal love is often our first experience of love and primary attachment from birth. A mother provides nurturance through food and comfort, protection from physical and emotional threats, and guidance in how to navigate through the world. All three components are extremely important in shaping who we are and how we relate to others as we grow up. A child learns emotional regulation and develops healthy trust from how his or her mother is attuned to their needs. This primary attachment in childhood and loss of it can have long-term ripple effects into adolescence and adulthood.

I appreciated how the video addressed both bereavement loss and estrangement loss. Many find both subjects uncomfortable to talk about, but avoiding the topic can only further isolate those who have experienced mother loss. When the death loss is sudden and off-time, one might present a reduced ability to cope due to the shock, confusion, and feelings of unfairness and anger. When the death is anticipated, one may try to cope through anticipatory grieving and unfinished business dealings prior to death. When the loss occurs due to abandonment or estrangement, it is less socially sanctioned and leads to unresolved fear, self-esteem struggles, and attachment issues. Society often places mothers on a pedestal, so the children experiencing such disenfranchised losses feel shame and guilt in discussing it openly. It's also important to acknowledge the secondary losses associated with mother losses, such as changing school or homes, lack of support from the surviving caregiver who may also be grieving, and not being able to celebrate conventional milestones involving mothers.

There are slight differences in how maternal relationships shape sons and daughters. A positive mother-son relationship can produce emotional health and intelligence, security and confidence, less aggression and risk-related behaviors for the son. Mother and daughter connections are critical for building self-esteem, empathy and compassion, and positive role models for the daughters. Ability to form healthy friendships and relationships and exercise emotional intelligence and regulation are valuable outcomes of positive mother-son and mother-daughter relationships. Whether or not you get to form a healthy attachment to your mother can have a huge impact on your identity and being in the world.

There are noteworthy gender differences in grieving losses. Women tend to be natural intuitive grievers, while men are more likely to be instrumental and functional grievers. Each gender is also socialized and pushed into either space based on certain cultural expectations. Intuitive grievers go through waves of emotion, move in and out of grief more easily, and hold space in the pain of grief. Instrumental grievers are action-based and focus on problem solving and surviving the changes, rather than being feelings-driven. In a clinical setting, it will be important for me to take note of the different grief characteristics between genders and lean into helping the male or female client express themselves in new ways. Men can learn from women on better ways to process their emotions and seek social support, and women can learn from men on how to move forward in a meaningful way after a loss. Educating myself and understanding the different cultural nuances are key to becoming a more effective and affirming counselor who is not afraid to challenge and guide her clients into uncharted mental and emotional territories.