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Ambiguous Loss in Narcissistic Relationships

Ambiguous loss is a concept in psychology that refers to the experience of losing someone or something in a way that is unclear or uncertain. Navigating through grief and loss is already extremely difficult for most people, so having to deal with the loss of someone in an uncertain, unclear, or unacceptable way puts an even heavier toll on trying to move through grief. When it comes to ambiguous loss, people who are in narcissistic relationships know this feeling quite well because the dynamic between these two individuals can be characterized by ambiguity, unpredictability, and confusion. In this essay, I will explore the concept of ambiguous loss in narcissistic relationships including the causes, effects, and treatment. When speaking of narcissistic relationships, this will include all forms and dynamics, including intimate couples and parent/child relationships. In my personal life, I live with a couple who is my best friend (Bird) and her narcissistic boyfriend; when a narcissist enters the picture, they upturn every part of someone's life and that's exactly what he did to her. On top of the information I have received from the grief summit, I will also be using my first hand experience dealing with a narcissistic relationship.

Narcissistic relationships are characterized by a power imbalance, with one partner often dominating the other. The narcissist may use a variety of tactics to maintain control, including manipulation, gaslighting, and emotional abuse. This can create a sense of uncertainty and instability in the relationship, as the victim is never quite sure what to expect from their partner. They may also feel as though they are constantly walking on eggshells, trying to avoid triggering the narcissist's anger or displeasure. My roommate Bird has been with her narcissistic boyfriend for over a year and it has cost her freedom. When we speak about him, she does express that she wants freedom from the constant cycle of abuse, manipulation, and gaslighting, it's not like she enjoys it. He makes promises that he will change, do things differently, and for a short while he does, until she's comfortable and trusts him, and then the cycle continues all over again. The two options she constantly explores is whether she should remain in the relationship with him and keep believing his promises and hope he will change or be the one to make that change by ending the relationship.

One of the most challenging aspects of a narcissistic relationship is the experience of ambiguous loss. This occurs when the victim feels as though they have lost their partner, even though they are still physically present. This can happen in a number of ways. For example, the narcissist may emotionally withdraw from the relationship, leaving the victim feeling lonely and disconnected. This is especially hard on the victim who made their narcissistic partner their whole world. The sudden disconnect keeps them attached to the partner and wanting more of them, even if they are harmful. Alternatively, the narcissist may constantly criticize and belittle the victim, eroding their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. I saw this example specifically with Bird and she truly believed she was a "whore" and "no one would love her but him." This mindset kept her latched to him, even when he was disrespectful, cheating, and emotionally unavailable. Once victims get a peek through the looking glass of what's really occurring in the relationship, the relationship will never be the same again. My roommates' rose colored glasses came off after he cheated on her. Their whole relationship went extremely downhill and immediately his toxic behaviors were unhinged and she realized she has no idea who the person

she's dating really is. That being said, it was still extremely hard for her to handle this and the grief was confusing for her, because she still had somewhat of a boyfriend. In order for victims to truly move forward, they must accept the truth of their past, present, and future, and to mourn the loss that truth represents. It's been five months since the whole thing happened with Bird's boyfriend cheating and I believe she is just now starting to go through the process of accepting the things that occurred, are occurring, and will occur. After that process, I know that she will leave him for good.

The experience of ambiguous loss can have a number of negative effects on the victim's mental health. They may experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, they may resist grieving because it makes them feel helpless, powerless, and hopeless. They may also struggle with feelings of guilt and shame, believing that they are somehow responsible for the narcissist's behavior. Over time, the victim may begin to feel as though they have lost their sense of identity, as the narcissist's behavior has eroded their sense of self. All of these emotions piled on top of trying to leave a person that may bring them a lot of comfort and intimacy is almost an impossible task. This is why most people in a narcissistic relationship do not want to grieve the right way because it makes the loss more real. Since I have known Bird, she has hopped from serious relationship to the next, without taking any breaks in between, she called off an engagement to a man she was with for 4 years and did not grieve, but moved on immediately. Like many people in her position, most don't know how to "grieve" or where to even begin. It's up to the therapist to help their clients understand ambiguous losses and know that, even though it may be ambiguous, it's still worthy of experiencing real grief.

Even though it may seem challenging and at times, even impossible to cope with the ambiguous loss of a narcissistic partner, there are a number of treatment options that can be effective. The most important task of the victim is to rebuild a support system. Many times in narcissistic relationships the partner will slowly cut off the victims friends and family, making them their only source for everything. Secondly, the victim should seek out a mental health professional because the narcissist is good at making their partners or children feel like they are wrong all the time, or their opinion doesn't matter. Working with a professional can help point out those lies and develop coping strategies when the gaslighting or manipulation comes their way.

In conclusion, ambiguous loss is a common experience in narcissistic relationships. This type of loss can be difficult to navigate, and can have a number of negative effects on the victim's mental health. However, with the right support and resources, it is possible to heal and move forward. By seeking help, practicing self-care, and building a support network, victims can regain their sense of self and begin to heal from the trauma of their narcissistic relationship. Loss looks different for everybody and that doesn't mean that one person deserves to grieve more than the other person, a loss is a loss. Most people who are dealing with an ambiguous loss, don't even realize they are in the middle of grieving, which is detrimental to a person's mental health since grief can be debilitating at times.