

Strategies for Living With Ambiguity

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Assertion

We are influenced and shaped by a number of factors including:

- 1) The decade in which we were born
- 2) The place and culture of our birth
- 3) The values and practices of adults of influence
- 4) Family systems – birth, chosen, informal, adoptive, blended
- 5) Race, ethnicity, gender, age of parents
- 6) Socio-economic realities

Comfort with ambiguity – messages from all the above





Essentially, the only instrument we bring to the helping/caring process is ourselves. Hence, the more self aware we are the more present we can be in the supportive exchange.

Paraphrased from comments by Virginia Satir

Self Awareness

The expectation that we can be immersed in stressful work daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.



The expectation that we can leave stresses in our personal or work lives and not bring them to the other is also unrealistic.

The way we deal with distress and loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else.



Losses in Later Life (different from earlier periods)

- Rapidity of Losses
- Finality of Losses
- The Ever-Present Character of Loss – oneself and one's peers
- Losses Are Cumulative
- Meanings that Losses Contain (dignity, independence, safety, etc.)
- Loss of the Future Story

Assertion - Loss

- One size doesn't fit all!!!
- We communicate in different ways
- We process information and experiences differently
- We learn some things rapidly, some things more slowly
- A current loss can evoke memories of previous losses
- Attachment varies from person to person
- Willingness to face illness, dying and death varies

HANDLE
WITH *Care*

The Guest House

This being human is a guesthouse.
Every morning is new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Beginning lines of a poem by Rumi





Two Kinds of Losses

Conspicuous losses – ones that are either obvious or easily known...at least by one's inner circle (*someone who wears glasses, uses a walker, tremors can be seen, announces retirement, or a public funeral*)

Internal, personal losses – changes in one's identity, roles, ways of life...including future stories

Assumed World

All of us from the moment of our birth, have been building inside ourselves a model of the world, a set of assumptions on the basis of which we recognize the world that we meet and plan our behaviour accordingly. Because this model is based on reality it is, most of the time, a valid and useful basis for thought and behaviour. We rely on the accuracy of these assumptions to maintain our orientation in the world and to control our lives. **Anything which challenges this model incapacitates us.**

Colin Murray Parkes



Identity Contingencies

Things one has to deal with in a situation because you have been given a social identity because you are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, black, Latino, politically conservative or liberal, diagnosed with a bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on

From *Whistling Vivaldi* by Claude Steele

Things one has to deal with at end of life because of roles, history, differential coping, comfort, power, etc.

Bowman

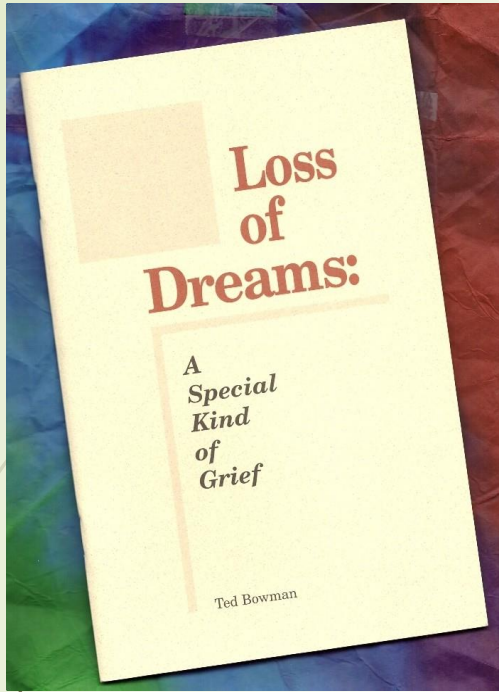


whistling vivaldi

how stereotypes affect us
and what we can do

CLAUDE M. STEELE

"This is an intellectual odyssey of the first order—a true tour de force."
—WILLIAM G. BOWEN



Shattered Dreams

Shattered Dreams

Losing An Emotionally
Important Image
Of Oneself, One's Family,
One's Life, One's Work,
Even One's Death

Losing The Possibilities Of
"What Might Have Been"

Abandonment Of Plans For
A Particular Future

The Dying Of A Dream



Shattered Dreams and Medical Conditions

- the dream of health...a healthy life...body image
- the dream of continuity
- the dream of how a home should be
- the dream of caring for others
- the dream of independence
- the dream that the couple/family relationship could withstand any stress or challenge
- the dream of the "normal life"
- specific dreams related to career, to travel, retirement, education, etc.
- the dream of fairness, justice

Shattered Dreams and Aging



the dream of retirement

the dream about how or where a home "should be"

losses – accumulation and overload

the dream of family privacy

the dream that the family relationship could withstand any stress
or challenge

the fear of having “enough” money, time, patience

the dream that plans would be sufficient...or things will work out
when we get there

the dream of dying and death

Conflict - Definitions

- Conflict occurs when two or more people differ and at least one of them thinks it matters
- Conflict involves competing stories - Neither is right or wrong, but each story is constructed by OUR ways of:
 - Taking in information
 - Interpreting information
 - Making conclusions
 - Weaving these together in a stable story



Many Losses Are Ambiguous

Losses that are:

unclear,
confusing, and for which

future stories / outcomes
are unknown

Etymology: “driven in both ways”

Boss



Ambiguity

Psychologically Present

and

Physically Absent

Physically Present

and

Psychologically Absent

Pauline Boss





4 Factors Which Influence Illness or Deaths

Magnitude

Intensity

Duration

Inherent **Ambiguity**

Hyman and Woog in Research in Nursing and Health



Ambiguity

When death comes...

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

Mary Oliver

I thought I could describe a state, make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out
to be not a state but a process.

C.S. Lewis

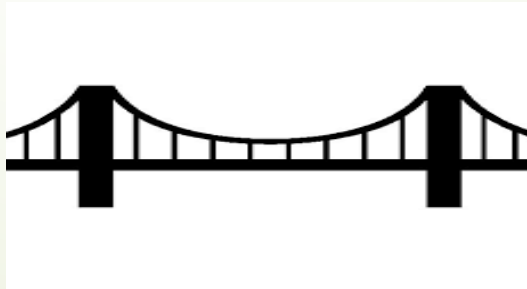
My father is looking at the end of his life,
and it looks like the end of the world to him.
There is no one left from his town to say good-bye.

Cathy Song

Thresholds / Thin Places

Conversations at **threshold places (also called thin or hinge places...the borderlands)** are:

conversations that include any information which seriously and/or adversely affects an individual or family's view of its own or someone else's future.





Assertion: Family Dynamics At End-of-Life

- Some presume that a “good death” includes minimal pain for the dying, cooperation and conviviality in the family circle, and, most egregious, without complex grieving by one and all.
- A “good death, rather, can include minimal pain for the dying, conflicts faced and handled well, and wide ranges of grief expression. “Rage, rage, against the dying of the light” is more likely common than uncommon.
 - Dylan Thomas and Ted Bowman



Two Kinds of Conflicts

- *Task conflict* - about facts, process, how to do things in the best way - essential for good decision-making, destructive of good relations unless addressed
- *Emotional conflict* - about feelings, anger, jealousy, fear - common, occurs easily, destructive of good relations unless addressed

Self-Awareness about Conflict

- Generally, what is your comfort with ambiguity
- What is your confidence in dealing with ambiguity?
- Do you foresee that some ambiguity or conflict is likely in most aging situations?
- What do you do physically when faced with ambiguity?





Compassion

- ▶ Compassion is the ability to vitally imagine what it is like to be an other, the force that makes a bridge from the island of the one individuality to the island of the other. It is an ability to step outside your own perspective, limitations and ego, and become attentive in a vulnerable, encouraging, critical, and creative way with the hidden world of another person.

▶ John O'Donohue

Appreciative Inquiry

Move from seeing someone, their situation as a problem to:

If ambiguity was handled well, what would that look like, what would happen? Be specific

Are there examples that you have experienced or heard about when the situation was addressed respectfully and effectively? If so, what was done...?

Generate options, be creative



Listening Means Listening.

Many People Do More Preparing
Than They Do Listening

Listening, Really Listening,
Requires One To Pay More Attention
To What The Other Person Is Now
Saying Than To One's Response

Understanding Can Be More Important than Agreement



Perspective on Anger

Anger Is Often A Secondary
Emotion, Preceded By A More
Primary Emotional Experience

Listen For Messages Beneath
The Messages
(Meta-communication)



Communication

- Communication is contagious. When others are agitated or angry, speak slowly, softly, strongly
- Don't escalate
- Avoid character comments
- Someone's truth may not be factual
- Break the conversation into manageable pieces (remember many family members are flooded with feelings and thoughts)
- Separate, if possible, how someone will die or died from that they will die or are dead *how* frequently dominates *what*
- Ask: *what do you know about your _____'s condition...or the dying process...or ...?*

Communicating About Change and Distress

- Information tames fears
- Information gives a sense of control
- Communication gives permission
- If you don't talk, people fill in blanks
- Communication helps with future fears, plans, or concerns
- Listen with empathy
- Don't interrupt too quickly
- Revisit and re-communicate
- Be patient

Emswiler and Emswiler





Responses to Ambiguity

When working therapeutically with families facing ambiguous loss, the both/and approach is essential. In the absence of clear information, we cannot say, for example, that a person is dead or not dead, or here or not here. With both/and thinking, people can understand more easily that a loved one on a respirator, but brain dead, is both gone and not gone, or that a person with Alzheimer's disease is both here and not here. Such situations call for dialectical interventions. Boss

Grief, I have come to think, is *wanting the death or destruction of the loved one to be undone, while at the same time knowing it cannot be undone.*

Wolterstorff



Responses to Ambiguity

Label What People Are Experiencing (Responses Will Vary)

Provide A Structure and Setting For Contact (Formal and Informal)

Provide Information

Increase Tolerance For Ambiguity

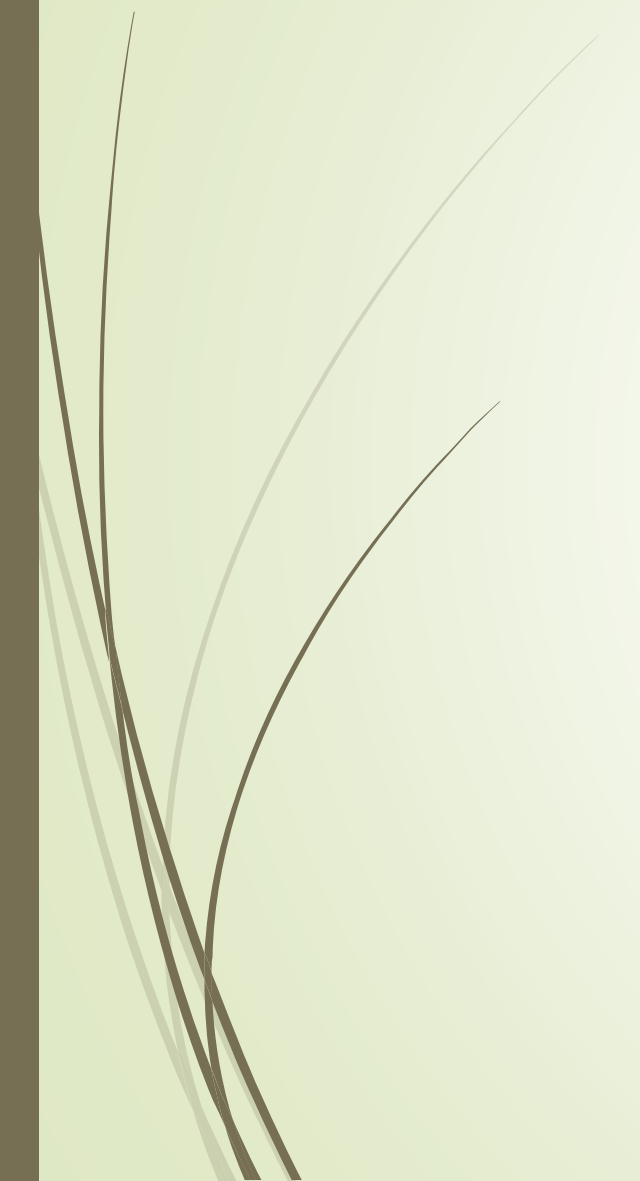
Be Flexible

Adapt Routines

Minimize Helplessness

Normalize Situation

Emphasize What Can Be Changed Or Addressed -
What Can Not Be Changed Or Addressed





Show Up
And Choose To Be Present

Pay Attention
To What Has Heart And Meaning

Tell The Truth
Without Blame Or Judgment

Be Open To Outcome
Not Attached To Outcome

Angeles Arrien



Suggestions

- Listen And Practice Curiosity
- Clarify Roles – Who Does What, Whose Job This Is
- Commitment To We / Our
- Recognize Difference Between What And How
- Expect And Practice Civil Discourse



Dual-processing model

(Stroebe and Schut 2001)

Loss Orientation

Grief work

Intrusion of grief

Denial and
avoidance of
restoration changes

Restoration Orientation

Attending to life changes

Doing new things

Distraction, respite,
avoidance of grief

New roles, identities,
relationships

When Asked...What Helps...?

It is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions or cures, acknowledge the pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand

Someone who can be silent in a moment of despair or confusion

Who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us our loss



hope
is
real.

Definitions usually include:

EXPECTATION

DESIRE

Which can involve GOALS, ATTRIBUTES, REDEFINITION,
MEANING, PEACE, ENERGY