

WORKING WITH PEOPLE EXPERIENCING AMBIGUOUS LOSS

In situations of natural disaster or conflict, Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers are often faced with individuals going through a devastating experience, such as not hearing from a loved one for several weeks, or even months or years.

This form of loss, called ambiguous loss according to [Dr. Pauline Boss](#), unlike that caused by a clear and definite death, is characterized by the absence of certainty as to the fate of a loved one. This could affect people affected by natural disasters, armed conflict, migration, or displacement..

Ambiguous loss can have profound consequences at both individual and community levels.

- At the individual level, it can lead to feelings of helplessness, distress and confusion, as well as a struggle to make sense of the situation. Individuals may feel guilt, anxiety and a sense of incompleteness. Making decisions, adapting to new family dynamics, an uncertain civil identity and continuing to lead a normal daily life can all be challenges when someone dear to them goes missing.
- At the community level, ambiguous loss can affect family and social dynamics, disrupt support networks and generate emotional tensions. Since the fate of the missing person is unknown, there are few culturally accepted rituals for honoring the missing, acknowledging the loss within the family.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VOLUNTEERS:

Practice Active Listening

Volunteers should offer attentive, empathetic listening, allowing those affected to share their experiences and emotions without judgment or interruption. Active listening helps to recognize and accept the ambivalence of the emotions and thoughts expressed by the interlocutor, creating a space where everyone feels heard and understood without judgment. This helps people to build their own story and put words to ambiguous loss.

Avoiding false promises:

It's essential not to make promises you can't keep. Volunteers should be honest about the limits of their help, while offering emotional and practical support wherever possible. However, giving realistic hope also means offering positive and realistic support, encouraging possibilities for improvement or resolution, while remaining true to the truth.



Fostering Resilience

Encouraging those affected to find ways of coping with their situation, focusing on resilience and the internal and external resources available. Resilience means accepting the ambiguous loss and at the same time continuing to invest in life.

Encouraging routine and social support

Helping people continue with daily tasks and participating in joyful, meaningful activities can serve as a break from repetitive negative thoughts. Physical exercise, creative hobbies and investing in close relationships with the people in their lives can also help. This allows a renewed sense of normalcy and the resumption of daily functioning such as work, child-rearing, or household chores.

Providing Resources

Refer people to appropriate psychosocial resources and support services (psychological, social, financial and/or legal assistance). Consider that ambiguous loss affects the whole family system. We need to think about resources that can be adapted to all family members, taking age and gender into account.

Create rituals to remember, celebrate and honor the lost persons

This can take place around important dates such as birthdays and anniversaries. For example, light a candle each year on the missing person's birthday and share special memories with family and friends. Or plant a tree or a plant on the anniversary or on International Missing Persons Day, to honor the departed.

For more information, here's a [link](#) to the online training on ambiguous loss.

