

# Distance Grandparenting and Ambiguous Loss

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Emeritus Professor Pauline Boss, from the University of Minnesota, studies families, stress and loss. She is the principal theorist of the concept of Ambiguous Loss: a loss that always remains unclear.

Boss first applied the theory in the 70s when studying families. Boss noticed the physically present fathers were oftentimes psychologically absent: an uncertain loss for his family. From these observations emerged the concept of Ambiguous Loss, representing the psychological absence with a physical presence (70s fathers), and/or the physical absence with a psychological presence (distance families).

When I first came across her scholarship, I was immediately 'at home'. She understood how I felt, as a distance grandparent and she delivered bountiful, 'ah-ha' moments.

Distance grandparents understand Ambiguous Loss. They haven't lost their distance family: their family hasn't died. However, they have lost *how* they imagined their family would function. They have lost a slice of their identity and the nature of their perceived grandparent, senior years. Their distance family is around in spirit. There are photos and a spare bedroom or two with neatly made beds.

In this age of globalisation it has been necessary that distance grandparents inevitably adjust and accept their distance family 'package', with its pros and cons, and quite simply... make the most of it. And mostly, they do. Occasional visits, in either direction, have become the substitute for the preferred, permanent physical presence, and it could be said – we rather got used to those visits. Perhaps, we even took them for granted.

COVID-19, however, has delivered distance grandparents a *second* blow - another dose of Ambiguous Loss - a further watering down of distance grandparenting. Our freedom to visit family, or them visit home, has been snatched from our grasp: the future, once again unclear. The question these days is, "when can we travel again?" and sadly for some, "Am I still able?"

The last 12 months has taken its toll on many who might ordinarily have been jetting away if things were still 'normal'. But COVID-19 has knocked the stuffing out of them and even with the assurance of vaccination jab - it all feels 'too hard'.

In a recent New York Times article, author and founder of an award-winning consumer health website, Tara Parker-Poole, cited bereavement expert, Kenneth J Doka. She spoke of disenfranchised grief. I would explain it as many small losses that keep piling on top of each other. Individually they aren't a big deal, but combined they are.

When 'normality' eventually returns for Distance Families the responsibility to travel may fall entirely on the shoulders of the distance middle generation and distance grandchildren. This is a responsibility and expense that wasn't necessarily in the budget or anticipated this early. The theory of Ambiguous Loss goes a long way to explaining the nebulous, hazy, murky nature of the uncertain losses experienced by all generations of distance families.

Accepting these losses... remains a big ask.

Helen [Ellis](#) is the founder of DistanceFamilies.com and the author of the Distance Families Book Series.

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