



Distance Families, Covid-19 and Ambiguous Loss

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Emeritus Professor Pauline Boss, from the University of Minnesota, is known for her study of families, stress and loss. 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.

Boss is the principal theorist of the concept of Ambiguous Loss: a loss that always remains unclear. She 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).

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 (photos, mementoes and things) – but they are not here physically.

In this age of globalisation and transnational mobility, 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 have. 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 theory of Ambiguous Loss goes a long way to explaining the nebulous, hazy, murky nature of the uncertain losses experienced by distance families.

Accepting this latest loss ... remains — a big ask.

Helen Ellis is the founder of DistanceFamilies.com

She is presently working on a three-book series titled
Being a distance grandparent,
Being a distance son or daughter and
Being a distance grandchild.

“My 20+year distance grandparenting journey has delivered me a unique understanding of distance familying and I feel passionately, that by sharing inter-generational experiences we will grow in our understanding, and most importantly empathy, of each other’s worlds.”

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