

Heart of Care · Free Guide ■ 1

When the Living Won't Pick Up

a primer on ambiguous grief

For people grieving someone who is still alive but unreachable.

Estranged parents. Loved ones lost to addiction.

Families that won't pick up the phone.

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— the Honey Badger behind Heart of Care —

for Uncle David

What this guide is

This is a short, plain-language guide for a specific kind of grief that doesn't get a funeral. There's no casserole. No card. No date on a calendar. The person you're grieving is still alive somewhere — still breathing, still walking around, maybe even still in your phone contacts — and they have made themselves unreachable to you.

Maybe they stopped picking up. Maybe they pick up and hang up. Maybe they answer but speak through you, as if you're not really there. Maybe they're lost inside an addiction and the person you knew comes and goes. Maybe they're alive in the world but dead to you on purpose, and that was their choice, and you're left holding it.

That grief has a name. It's called **ambiguous grief**, or sometimes **living loss**. And it is real grief — not a story you're making up, not “just being dramatic,” not something you should be over by now.

This guide will name it, give it a shape you can hold, and offer two grounding practices for the moments the phone doesn't ring back. It's short on purpose. You don't need a textbook right now. You need someone to sit on the porch with you and say *yes, that's what this is, and you're not crazy*.

What ambiguous grief is

The therapist Pauline Boss gave this grief its name in the 1970s, working with the families of soldiers missing in action. She noticed that people whose loved ones were physically gone but psychologically present — or physically present but psychologically gone — were grieving differently than people whose person had simply died.

Two shapes of it:

1. The person is here, but not here.

Dementia. Active addiction. Severe mental illness. A loved one who is in the room but doesn't recognize you, or who recognizes you but isn't reachable through the thing that is eating them.

2. The person is gone, but still alive somewhere.

Estrangement. Disowning. The silent treatment that goes on for years. A parent who lets the phone ring out. A sibling who blocked you. An adult child who walked. A loved one in a homeless camp halfway across the country.

Both shapes carry the same wound: **you don't get to mourn them properly because they're still out there.** The grief can't close. There's always a sliver of the door open. *Maybe today they'll call. Maybe this is the year. Maybe if I just...*

That sliver is what makes it so heavy. Real death has a date. Ambiguous loss has a doorway you keep watching.

Why nobody around you sees it

Regular grief is something the people around you understand. They bring food. They say *I'm so sorry for your loss*. They give you a few weeks of soft treatment and forgiveness for being a little broken.

Ambiguous grief gets none of that. Instead you get:

- “*Well, she’s still alive. At least you have that.*”
- “*Have you tried just calling him again?*”
- “*You need to forgive and move on.*”
- “*That’s your mother. You only get one.*”
- “*Why are you still upset about this?*”

Each of those sentences is a small door slammed in your face. They’re not malicious. Most of the people saying them just don’t have a category for what you’re carrying. Their imagination stops at the headstone. They can’t picture a grief without one.

So you start to wonder if maybe you’re the broken one. Maybe you are dramatic. Maybe you should be over it. The world’s silence about your grief becomes part of your grief.

You’re not broken. The world is just under-equipped. This guide is one small shovel for digging the category open.

The blank wall

There's a specific cruelty inside ambiguous grief that the word "estrangement" doesn't quite cover. It's the part where you finally work up the courage to *name* what they're doing — the silence, the hang-ups, the years of being treated like you don't exist — and they look straight through you as if the wound isn't there.

No defense. No apology. No fight. Just a blank wall.

That blank wall is its own kind of cruelty. Often it's the worse one. Because as long as someone is yelling back, you can at least *see* them. The blank wall tells you that to them, your wound is not happening. And if it's not happening, then you must be the one making it up.

Hear this, please: **they are not going to see it.** Not because you haven't explained it well enough. Not because you haven't found the right words yet. They will not see it because seeing it is not survivable for them. Their whole self-concept is built on not seeing it. You could write the perfect letter, get a therapist to mediate, hand them a transcript of every conversation — and they would still look at you with that flat face and say some version of *I don't know what you're talking about.*

You are not crazy. You are not exaggerating. You are not being unfair. You are seeing clearly, and they are refusing to. Those are two different things, and you don't have to keep paying for their refusal with your own sanity.

The grief inside the grief

Ambiguous grief almost always carries a smaller, sharper grief inside it: the grief for the person you needed them to be.

Some part of you is still a son or a daughter or a sister or a friend hoping for the conversation that was never going to happen. The apology you'll never get. The phone call where they finally say your name with tenderness. The mother who picks up. The father who notices. The brother who comes back. The friend who says *I see what I did*.

You're grieving two people, not one: the actual person, and the version of them you needed to exist. The actual person is still out there refusing. The version of them you needed never existed at all.

Both losses are real. Both deserve to be cried over. And the second one is often the lonelier of the two, because nobody else even knew that person existed — they only lived inside your hoping.

A grounding practice for the day they don't call

— the five-thing porch —

When the phone won't ring back — or worse, when it rings and gets hung up on — your nervous system goes into a small, private emergency. Heart speeds up. Chest tightens. Old shame comes in the side door. This is what to do in the next five minutes.

Step 1. Put the phone down somewhere you can't see it. Not in your hand. Not in your pocket. Across the room. Face down.

Step 2. Find a place to sit where your feet touch the ground. A porch is best. A chair will do. The floor will do.

Step 3. Name five things you can see. Out loud, if you can. *Cup. Window. Curtain. My own hand. A leaf.* Slowly. The slower the better.

Step 4. Name four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste. The order doesn't matter. The naming is what matters.

Step 5. Now say this, out loud: *"The call I wanted is not coming. And I am still here. I am still here. I am still here."*

That last step sounds small. It is not small. You are doing the thing they wouldn't do for you: you are picking up. You are saying your own name. You are answering yourself.

Three prompts for the porch journal

Pick one. You don't need to do all three, or any of them. They're just here for the night you can't sleep and you want somewhere to put it.

1.

Who am I grieving who is still alive? Name them. Then write one sentence about what I miss that I never actually had with them.

2.

What does the blank wall look like, when they give it to me? Write the face. Write the silence. Write what it does to my body in the next sixty seconds.

3.

If I knew for certain they would never pick up again, what would I let myself stop hoping for? What energy would come back to me?

These aren't homework. Nobody's grading them. The point is just to put a sentence on a page that nobody around you wants to hear — and to let the page be the one that listens.

A practice for letting a little hope go

— the small letting-go —

You don't have to give up on them all at once. That's too much. What you can do is let go of *one specific hope* at a time, in a small ceremony that nobody else has to witness.

Pick one piece. Not the whole relationship. Just one piece. For example:

- *The hope that she'll say sorry for the day she hung up on him.*
- *The hope that he'll come to my birthday this year.*
- *The hope that they'll ever ask how I am and mean it.*

Write that one hope down on a small piece of paper. Read it out loud. Say "*I am letting this one go for today. I might pick it up again tomorrow. That's allowed. But today I'm setting it down.*" Then either burn it (safely, in a sink or a fire pit), bury it in a flowerpot, or tear it up small and throw it in the compost.

This isn't about moving on. It's about giving your hands something to do besides keep checking the phone. It's about giving one of the small hopes back to the earth so you can carry less of it tomorrow.

If your family is telling the wrong story

A common feature of ambiguous grief: the people around you decide what happened to your person, and the story they decide on is wrong. They blame the addiction. They blame the illness. They blame the choices. They never blame the silence — the silence they participated in, the calls they didn't answer, the door they locked.

If this is part of your grief, please know: you are allowed to keep the true story. You don't have to convert anyone. You don't have to win a family debate. You can just — quietly, on a porch somewhere — refuse to let the wrong version be the only version. Tell it to one trusted person. Tell it to a journal. Tell it to the empty room. The true story being told *once*, anywhere, by anyone, is enough to keep it alive.

Heart of Care has a second free guide for this part — ***The Official Story Was Wrong***. It's coming to the Resource Barn soon. If you're here because someone in your life died with a story attached to them that wasn't the real one, you're not alone in that, and we'll meet you there.

You are not crazy for feeling this

You are grieving a person who is still alive and choosing to be unreachable. That is one of the loneliest griefs there is. It does not get a casserole. It does not get a date on a calendar. It gets you, sitting on a porch, holding a phone that doesn't ring back.

And it gets, now, this small handful of pages — a category for what you're carrying, two practices for the worst hours, three prompts for the night journal, and one stubborn voice on the other side of the door saying:

Yes. That's what this is.

You're not making it up.

You're not too much.

You're grieving someone the world refuses to let you grieve.

And I see you.

*from the porch,
Briana — the Honey Badger*

What's next, if you want it

This guide is part of a small set of free grief tools at Heart of Care, and a deeper paid workbook on the same ground.

In the Resource Barn (free):

- **When the Living Won't Pick Up** — this guide.
- **The Official Story Was Wrong** — for families that rewrite a death.
- **Grief in Recovery** — when you can't drink it away.

In the Shop (the deep work):

- **When the Living Won't Pick Up — the Workbook.** Roughly 75 pages. Letters you'll never send. The phone that doesn't pick up. Loving someone lost to addiction. Surviving the silence sober. A small ritual for the people the world forgot.

The story behind all of this lives at heart-of-care.life/for-uncle-david. If you want to know why this work exists, that's where to find it. He was eight years older than me, and he died in 2018 in a snowstorm in a homeless camp in Tennessee, calling for a sister who wouldn't pick up. This guide is for him. And it's for you.

Heart of Care — from survival mode to stability.
heart-of-care.life

sit on the porch a moment

What now?

You just finished When the Living Won't Pick Up.

If this guide named something you've been carrying without a word for it — good.
The naming is the first soft place to land.

Soft Landings — the keepsake workbook

Tender chapters for the early days after loss, estrangement, or relapse. The full workbook this primer is the front porch of.

Sit on the porch →

heart-of-care.life/after/when-the-living-wont-pick-up

with care · Heart of Care · written for Uncle David