

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Ambiguous Loss and Grief

What is ambiguous loss and grief?

- Ambiguous loss is a type of loss that happens when a person with dementia is physically present but is experiencing changed cognitive abilities.
- A family member caring for a person with dementia may experience ongoing stress and grief due to the ambiguous loss of having a spouse or parent still here, but not present in the same way as before.

Why is ambiguous loss and grief different from other types of grief?

- When a person is bereaved, they are likely to receive support from family and friends and may eventually find closure through the natural grieving process.
- Ambiguous loss complicates grief. It's often hard for a caregiver to know whether or how to grieve.
- Many aspects of the person with dementia are lost, but some remain. Family and friends may not recognize the caregiver's need to grieve the many losses at different stages of the disease and receive support while the person with dementia is alive.
- The caregiver may feel like he or she is living in limbo, unable to fully grieve or resolve the losses that have already occurred while anticipating other losses that lie ahead.

How can HCAs provide support to individuals and families experiencing ambiguous loss and grief?

- Be sensitive to a wide range of caregiver grief reactions, including sadness, anger, anxiety, ambivalence, guilt, denial, and helplessness.
- Use empathetic listening skills.
- Validate the person's feelings and experience in a non-judgmental way.
- Acknowledge and affirm caregivers' strengths, success, and resilience in coping with losses and adapting to changes.
- Help families and individuals recognize and understand the feelings of ambiguous loss and work through them with the help of Alzheimer Society staff or other health care providers.
- Provide strategies to help caregivers learn how to live with ambiguous loss and remain healthy and resilient.
- Help caregivers find creative ways to engage with the person with dementia.
- Make a referral to the Alzheimer Society of B.C.
- Encourage caregivers to practise good self-care, for example by staying socially and physically active, eating well, and engaging in the spiritual or religious practices that are important to them.