

# Support for Mental Health as a Production Tool in Farming

## An Ambiguous Loss Perspective

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### Background

#### Mental Health

- Farmers face enhanced mental health burden
- Deaths to suicide 25 per 100,000 (>60%)
- Suicide fatality higher than accidents (Rosmann, 2016)

#### Grief and Loss in Farming

- Sudden loss (e.g., fire)
- Stretched out loss (e.g., financial strain)
- Grief is the process of dealing with loss
- Assumption is that grief will end
- Protracted grief can compromise mental health

Losses that are ongoing or compounded can contribute to unresolved grief. In farming, losses such as livestock, land, climate and family changes compound to create ongoing grief that may not be addressed or even acknowledged.

#### Ambiguous loss

- Allows a different way to frame, focus on resilience
- A loss that remains unclear and thus has no closure.
- A loss that has no official verification; can't be clarified, cured, or fixed.
- The loss can be physical or psychological but with incongruence between absence/presence.
- The pathology lies in the external context of ambiguity, not in the individual or family (Boss, 2022)

#### Some assumptions

- Ambiguous loss disrupts relationships.
- People have a psychological family - which may be the same or different from a legal or biological family.
- Ambiguity in loss complicates the grieving process.
- Grief continues and closure does not happen, people must learn to live with grief.
- Intervention to build resiliency - (as opposed to fix the problem or the grief).
- People supporting grieving farm families must be comfortable dealing with ambiguity in the families they support (Boss, 2022)

### Types of Loss



### Ambiguous loss in Farming

Ambiguous loss theory has been applied to many family situations, and it has applications for farm families as well. Because the theory looks at both physical and psychological loss, it fits well into the realities of farming. The agricultural community experiences a high level of stress due to the nature of farming and its uncontrollable aspects (such as weather or markets). The addition of ambiguous loss can cause additional stress and even immobilize farm families from making decisions.

Type I ambiguous loss (physical absence, psychological presence) may be experienced when a farm sells off part of their enterprise, such as a herd of dairy cows. The cows may be gone, but the family may still think of themselves as dairy farmers. Type II ambiguous loss (physical presence, psychological absence) could be experienced in situations where the farmer is so preoccupied with the farm, they are not able to be fully present in relationships with their families.

### Theory of Change

## Knowledge

- Loss and grief
- Stress vs crisis
- Family and business boundaries

## Reflection (self & family)

- Completing activities
- Identifying personal losses
- Engaging with material
- Family conversations

## Self Understanding

- New identity
- Meaning-making
- Hope
- Revising attachment
- Normalizing ambivalence

## Resilience action steps

- Sharing story
- Having meetings
- Making decisions

### Program outline

The Ambiguous Loss and Farming booklet and curriculum follow a similar outline, with the curriculum serving as an opportunity to expand on the content of the booklet. The outline of the content is as follows.

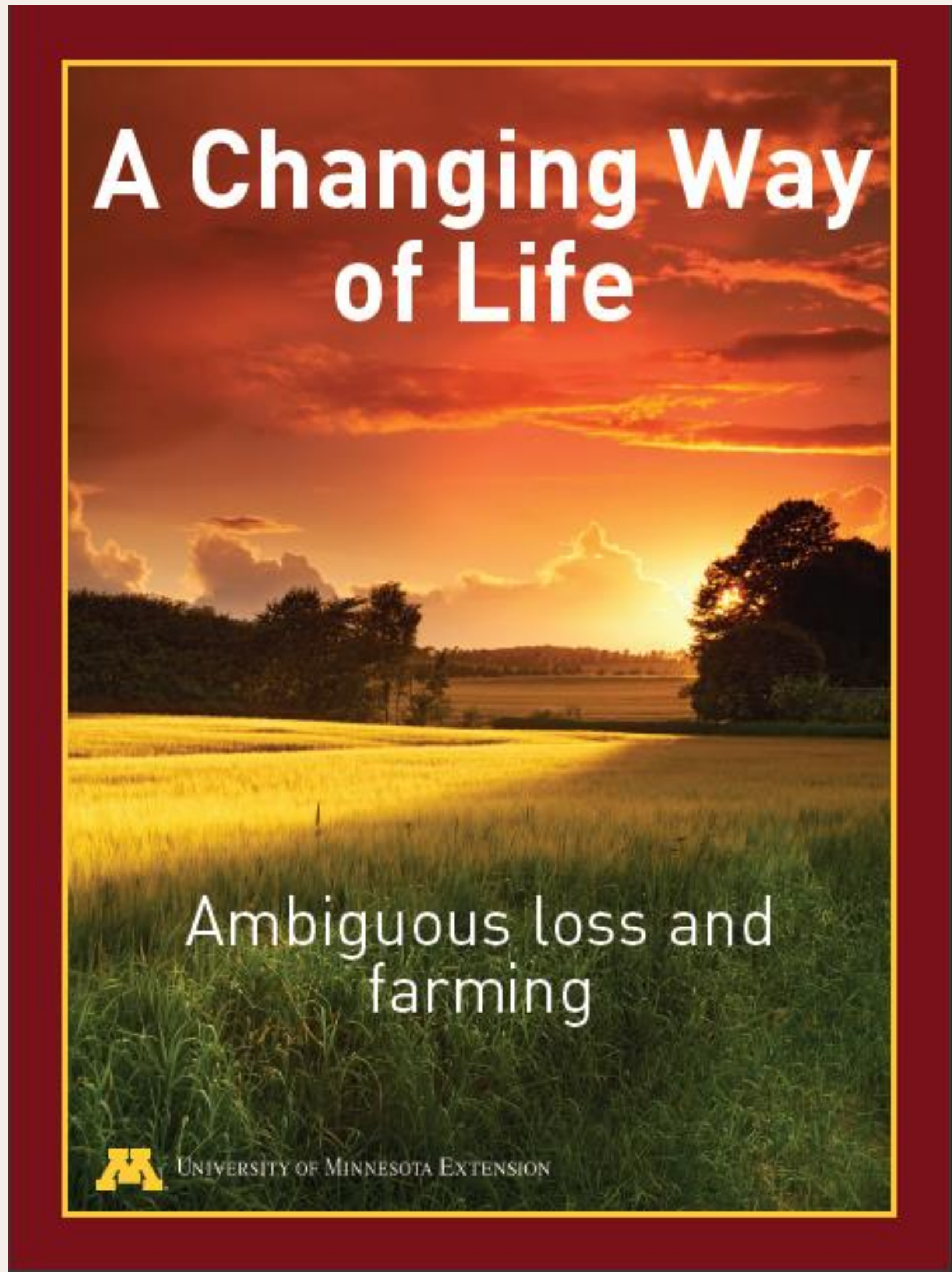
1. Introduction
2. Taking stock
3. Is your stress an “ambiguous loss”?
4. Being clear about suicide risk
5. Shifting gears for survival
6. Family and business boundary definition
7. Family and business meetings
8. After the meeting: building resilience
9. Where do we go from here?

The curriculum will provide supplemental handouts on meeting facilitation strategies and resources available at the national, state and local level. The workbook includes various activities to help farm families identify their stressors, tools available to them, and strategies for moving forward. An example of the “classifying stressors” activity is included.

### Moving forward

- Working with partner states to “Train the Trainer”
- Training facilitators throughout Minnesota
- Program implementation will begin later this year
- Future evaluation focused on examining theory of change

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### Classifying stressors activity

Think about the events and situations causing stress in your family, especially with regard to your links to farming and farm community and culture. Classify your stressors based on Table 1.2 below and complete the matrix with your own family situation in mind. Please note: some stressors may fit multiple classifications and some classifications may be left blank.

Table 1.2

Stressor events and situations for your family	
Focus on links to agriculture and farming community	
Source	
Internal: Parents' divorce	External: COVID-19 pandemic
Type	
Normative, developmental, predictable: Dad's retirement from farming	Catastrophic, situational, unexpected: Brother's accident, arm amputation
Ambiguous: Siblings' intentions of returning to the farm	Clear: Purchase of farmland
Volitional: Kids leaving for college	Nonvolitional: Spouse losing job and second income
Duration	
Chronic: Supply chain issues	Acute: Mom's hip surgery
Density	
Cumulative: Drought, pandemic, low profits	Isolated: Livestock disease outbreak

Note: Adapted from Boss, P. (2002). Family stress management: A contextual approach (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.