

Reality bytes: When virtual relationships and real life collide

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Mikayla Quigley, of Boulder, lost a friend. Her friend's name was Monique.

Monique was hit and killed by a truck while she was walking across the street to work. Probably.

Mikayla, 17, will likely never know, for sure. All she knows is Monique is dead to her, and that is reason enough to cry.

Here is what else Mikayla knows: Monique's screen name was "Belle." She said she was 16, lived in Canada, liked Harry Potter and spent hours nearly every day for two years writing back and forth with Mikayla on

www.gaiaonline.com.

Mikayla knows some highly personal stuff about Monique, too — although she doesn't know what the girl looked like, other than her cartoon representation online.

Mikayla never met Monique in person. But Monique was real to her, and called the girl one of her best friends.

Maybe Monique never existed. Maybe she is not dead. But that is not what Mikayla is trying to answer today. The Boulder girl wants to know what to do now: how to deal with her feelings of loss, which are very real, despite the fact that they were built — and crushed — virtually.

This is what happens when virtual reality collides with physical reality.

Technology continues to transform our relationships, from the way we communicate to the evolution of our social traditions. And not just the way relationships are built, but also how relationships end, whether in death, a break-up or "defriending." Sometimes, online connections just vanish without explanation, or a person deletes their information — so-called "electronic suicide." Other times, the loss is in an expectation or belief, when what you thought was true turns out to be a lie. And underscoring it all: a whole new set of rules and questions that make closure difficult.

Some experts call virtual loss a new type of "ambiguous loss," similar to when a loved one is kidnapped or a body never returns home from war. It can be difficult to let go because of the nagging question (or hope) about whether the person is

actually gone.

Mikayla's mother, Betty Quigley, doesn't know what to do. The Internet brought a tragedy to her house, but not the dangers most parents are warned about.

Her daughter spends days in her bedroom, eyes fixed on the computer screen, waiting for an update. Mikayla is e-mailing with someone who claims to be her friend's sister. Then, the news comes.

Mikayla can't fall into the arms of friends. She can't attend a memorial service. She doesn't know any books or counselors with advice on how to process this kind of loss.

Betty Quigley wants to send the family flowers, but no one knows the girl's last name. Quigley calls and e-mails the Web site, but because it is set up to keep teenagers safe and anonymous, it does not collect or release personal details. Not even the city where the Quigleys can start looking.

The "denial" stage of virtual loss comes quickly and can be hard to shake. That's where Betty Quigley finds herself, scouring the Web for a news article about a girl in Canada who was hit by a truck. "There was some need to connect in some way," Quigley says.

She finds no answers.

Not to mention the inevitable question. Everyone's first response: "How do you know if she was a real person?"

Yes, some people lie online. But Mikayla, herself, had been real, and that made her mental and emotional investment real, her mother says.

Changing concept

of intimacy

Which also brings up the question of the legitimacy of online relationships. Can you build a connection without the physical component?

Increasingly more people are, as is evidenced by the growing number of geographically separated marriages, according to Cindy H. White, a communications associate professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

White says this reflects a shift in the concept of intimacy. Physical connection is being replaced by cognitive and knowledge-based relationships. Instead of sharing space together, people share thoughts, ideas and feelings — despite research that shows that children need physical touch to develop healthily, and that the majority of communication is non-verbal.

Mikayla thinks online relationships progress faster and get deeper than face-to-face ones, because the Internet wipes away social expectations and barriers.

No doubt, many people have less inhibition online, according to Beth Lonergan, a psychologist at the Mental Health Center of Boulder County. But that can also turn the online community into an electronic "Lord of the Flies," with no social norms or controls to promote "acceptable" behavior, she says. People don't have to be consistently accountable for what they do, including only showing selective sides of themselves, Lonergan says.

A loss from a lie

John Camfferman, 26, of Lit-

tleton, learned that the hard way. He met a woman named Nikki on a Christian dating site. They talked online and one the phone for eight-plus hours a night for three months. Nikki was talking about moving to Colorado so they could get married. They set a date for her move: just before Thanksgiving last year. They said they loved each other. Camfferman says he poured out his heart to her.

Then Nikki died.

He fell apart.

Then he found out she had faked her death to break up with him.

As well as faking an elaborate story that led up to her death, including being raped (twice), pregnant, stalked, having leukemia, heart problems, having the brakes cut on her car, deaths in her family — and eventually, Camfferman concluded that Nikki had made up her entire identity.

Whoever he'd been talking to had also been sending him disturbingly graphic and threatening e-mails pretending to be the man who had raped Nikki. Camfferman suspected the person was also pretending to be Nikki's neighbor and co-worker.

It was the denial stage of Camfferman's grieving process that slowly unveiled the even more upsetting truth about the woman he thought he was going to marry.

He didn't want to believe she was gone.

"I was searching for closure, hunting and searching," he says. "I wanted so badly to know what truly happened so I could move on."

Then, he noticed her passwords had been changed. Stories didn't match up. Finally, the "co-worker" confessed: Nikki had fabricated her death. And photos. And stories.

"With her death, I felt a huge loss, the loss of a very close friend, a connection to somebody I could tell anything to," Camfferman says. "It made it worse that she was lying. It made it 10 times worse. Because I had been honest to her."

You can suffer a loss from a lie, Camfferman says.

"You tell me you want to date me, that you want to love me and you want to be my wife. Even if that's not true, and you are married or something and you break it off with me, I still feel that loss because I thought I had a connection with you," he says. "It's a lost opportunity."

So now, the question of infallible "truth" becomes less relevant than a person's personal truth. In Mikayla's case, it didn't matter who her virtual friend was, whether she was ever really alive or now really dead, she says.

"I knew who she was to me," Mikayla says. "That's all that mattered. She was real to the people who she mattered to."

It's easy to discount a virtual relationship, especially from the outside if you have never had one, but this just amplifies the grief of the loss, according to Leysia Palen, a computer science professor at CU who studies the sociological use of technology.

"It is not better or worse," she says. "Relationships are evolving, expanding. They're different today."

Palen says it's similar to how people who have never loved a pet don't understand that kind of loss. In addition to missing the emotional connection and expressive outlet, the routine is disrupted, which can be especially noticeable for people who spend a lot of time on the Internet. Routines maintain order in our lives, Palen says.

Finding closure

Beyond the denial phase lies closure.

Mikayla does not have a traditional memorial service, so she invents her own. She burns a candle for her friend. She and the others who knew Monique online create a memorial thread on a bulletin board and share emotions and memories.

"Like traditional storytelling that'd go down at a funeral, except online," Mikayla's mother explains.

Then they collect a type of virtual "currency" on the Web site that allows members to "buy" special clothing and accessories for their cartoon characters. They auction some of their own accessories, and then donate the "money" to new members and other participants who've done nice things. Like a memorial fund. Only online.

Author Pauline Boss says loss plus uncertainty can freeze the grief process. But sometimes, she

says, closure is not an option.

You just recognize and accept the situation, not deny or avoid it, says Boss, who wrote the book "Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief."

Find a way to change, despite the ambiguity. Balance the grief about what was lost with the "participation in what is still possible," she says.

Which is what kept Camfferman involved in the online personals, despite his experience with the girlfriend who faked her death. Shortly thereafter, he met a local woman who turned out to be real, not just in existence but in what she told him. They have been together for nearly one year and are now planning their wedding.

"How do you know the truth? Exactly. You don't," Camfferman says. "You just have to trust people. ...Make sure you're putting yourself out there honestly and hoping they are honest, too."

As for Mikayla, she hasn't been on the Gaia site since her friend died.

That's another difficult aspect of virtual relationships, says Mikayla's mom, Betty Quigley. Once you find closure from this kind of loss, an even heftier door of finality shuts.

Mikayla won't drive past a building and "Remember when?" The e-mails the girls shared will eventually be deleted. The memorial forum will close down. The shared Internet buddies will likely fade, too. If Mikayla never goes on Gaia again, it is almost as if Monique never existed. Except for in her own head.

"Maybe there's not a word for this yet," Betty Quigley says. "It's not reality. It's beyond reality."

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