

Dealing With Grief: The 5 Stages of Grief

First, let's just try to understand the grief process. As one expert has said, "Grief is the process that allows us to let go of that which was and be ready for that which is to come." That's the purpose of grief work—it helps us move on. There are several models of grief that can provide a framework for what to expect and can help us "move on". One of the most well-known models of is "The 5 Stages of Grief," originally developed by the late (and great) Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Most of us have heard of this model, but what do these stages really mean? Let's take a look.

The 5 Stages of Grief are not intended to be worked through and "checked off," like a list. Rather, they are guideposts, helping us identify and understand what we may be feeling. Not everyone will experience every stage, and many people will go through the stages in a different order. In general, however, grief will include the following 5 phases.



Denial:

This stage includes feelings of shock, numbness, and disbelief. When loss first comes, most of us have a hard time believing "this is really happening." It's not that we're denying that the death or loss has *actually* occurred, but rather, it's a sense of, "I just can't believe this person I love isn't going to walk through that door anymore." Yet, the feelings of this stage also protect us. If we were to take in all the emotion related to the loss right away, it would be too overwhelming. Instead, our body and mind have a little time to adjust to the way things are now without the deceased. Part of the "denial" stage is also to tell our story over and over—one of the best ways to deal with trauma, and also a way for us to make it real. Eventually, we may begin asking questions such as, "How did this happen," or "Why?" This is a sign that we are moving out of the denial phase and into the feeling and healing process.



Anger:

Anger can present itself in a variety of ways—anger at your loved one, at others, at God, at the world, at yourself. And anger can be a difficult emotion to cope with. Some will express anger easily and toward anyone or anything, but many of us will suppress the anger instead, keeping it bottled up or even turning it inward, toward ourselves. Anger turned inward is guilt—guilt that we "should have done something," or even guilt that we feel angry toward the deceased. But anger is a natural response to

loss. And if we're able to identify and label our anger, it can help us express it in healthier ways that don't hurt others or ourselves. Saying, "I'm angry," and letting yourself feel that anger is part of the healing process.



Bargaining:

With bargaining, there's a sense that we just want life back to the way it used to be. We wish we could go back in time, catch the illness sooner, see something we didn't see. We may also feel guilty, focusing on "If only...". Bargaining can begin before the loss occurs or after. If the death or loss was anticipated, such as in the case of illness, bargaining may have been going on for a while—we bargain with God to please "spare" our loved one; we say we'll "do anything" to keep them here. If the death or loss was sudden, we may wish we could bring them back or go back in time and change things. Bargaining keeps us focused on the past so we don't have to feel the emotions of the present. But bargaining can be helpful too. Once we accept that our loved one is dying, we can use bargaining to ease our minds and theirs, praying for a "peaceful passing." Or once they have passed, bargaining can help us focus on the future as we pray to "be reunited with them someday."



Depression:

Eventually grief will enter on a deeper level, bringing with it intense feelings of emptiness and sadness. We feel like we don't care about much of anything and wish life would just hurry up and pass on by. Getting out of bed can be a huge burden, exhaustion and apathy can set in, and we may begin to wonder, "What's the point?" for pretty much everything. Others around us may try to help get us "out" of this "depression," but it's important to know that this isn't a mental illness—it's a natural response to loss. It's not a clinical depression we're experiencing, but rather bereavement and mourning, and the emotions of depression must be experienced in order to heal. We have to let ourselves feel the pain, loss, grief, and sadness, hard as it may seem. As Kubler-Ross encourages, "Make a place for your guest. Invite your depression to pull up a chair with you in front of the fire, and sit with it, without looking for a way to escape. Allow the sadness and emptiness to cleanse you and help you explore your loss in its entirety." [ii] This part of the grief process can last for some time—there's no set "time limit" for the emotions of grief. So be patient with yourself, and remember that feeling the "depression" is the way out of it.



Acceptance:

The experience of “depression” is what leads to “acceptance”. Many people mistakenly believe that “acceptance” means we are “cured” or “all right” with the loss. But this isn’t the case at all. The loss will forever be a part of us, though we will feel it more sometimes than others. Acceptance simply means we are ready to try and move on—to accommodate ourselves to this world without our loved one. This process can actually bring us closer to the one we loved as we make sense of how life *was* and process how we want life now *to be*.

Understanding the 5 Stages of Grief can help us realize our grief is “normal” and help us navigate the varying symptoms we each experience. Mostly, however, understanding the 5 Stages of Grief can reassure us that we are not alone in our grief—that grief is one experience we will *all* have (or will have) in common. And that means, if we choose to, we have plenty of experienced souls to whom we can turn for support and guidance through our times of grief.