

STAGES OF GRIEF

Many people who work with individuals who are grieving notice identifiable stages or feelings-states which are commonly experienced by those adjusting to loss. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross suggests 5 stages through which terminally ill persons may move as they progress from denial to acceptance of their fate. The stages of grief closely parallel Kubler-Ross stages of dying. The similarity of the stage theories is understandable, as both theories describe human reaction to loss.

The stage theory is a tool which may enhance understanding of the grief process. Those who work with survivors learn that each person adjusting to loss does so in his/her own way. Thus, although many bereaved persons experience feelings associated with the “stages,” such feelings are not necessary to each person’s healthy adjustment. Supportive counselors guard against expecting their client to exhibit continual forward movement through the stages or to conform to the stage theory at all.



Physician and Patient,
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Listen to your patients; they follow their own timetable.

STAGE ONE:

Shock and denial

“Physical death and social death do not take place simultaneously. Grief is a process or realization, of ‘making real’ the fact of loss.”

C. M. Parks

Denial is a common reaction to overwhelming change and loss. It can be a healthy and necessary temporary coping mechanism. If denial is accepted as long term coping mechanism it halts growth and adjustment.

As an initial reaction to death, shock and denial allow our bodies and minds a buffer-period in which to prepare to acknowledge a new reality. Most often shock and denial begin to break down within hours or days (even months) as pieces of reality are forced into consciousness. The full reality of a loss may not become emotionally real for months or years after the actual death.

Shock and denial become detrimental when maintained as an enduring adjustment to loss. Eventually, successful survivors must learn to let go of their denial and invest themselves in the present.

Funeral or memorial services, in addition to their other purposes, can make the fact of death more real for survivors. For many people the presence of the dead body or some acknowledgement of it is helpful. If it is not possible or culturally appropriate to view the body, conversation about the deceased loved one and remembrance of him/her may initiate gradual acceptance of the loss.

Only when the grieving survivor can intellectually and emotionally acknowledge the reality of the death can he/she begin to experience and move through the anger and emptiness death may produce.

STAGE TWO:

Anger and Guilt

“The important thing is for feelings to be permitted to emerge into consciousness. How they appear on the surface may be of secondary importance.”

C. M. Parks

There are myriad causes for the anger many people feel upon the death of a loved one. Survivors may be angry at the loved one for abandoning them, leaving them alone and hurt. Death may challenge one's understanding of God/Higher Power---how could God allow this to happen? Intellectually, the bereaved may understand that their loved one did not choose to leave them, nor did God make his/her death happen, but emotionally, anger, resentment, and self-pity are very real.

Forms of anger:

--Angry at their loved one:

- *“The one night I was away from his bedside he chose to die in order to punish me for leaving.”
- *“Why couldn't she accept our daughter's apology before she died? Now our daughter will suffer for the rest of her life.
- *“If he hadn't been so stubborn he would have accepted treatment and been alive today.”
- *“Why did she leave me? I'm so lonely.”

--Angry at God, circumstances:

- *“Why did my spouse get cancer?”
- *“How can one person bear the loss of his wife and son in the same year?”
- *“How can I praise God after all the suffering my husband and I endured during his illness?”

The anger demonstrated by such questions needs to be expressed. Because it may be difficult to express anger towards its source (the dead person, circumstances, or one's self) anger is frequently projected on one innocent person. The survivor may chastise physicians or nurses for their inability to save the loved one, or question the sincerity of a concerned friend or counselor.

Two factors may make it difficult for survivors to express anger:

Many cultures discourage expression of anger. (Anger is described as unbecoming, unpleasant or fruitless.) But anger that is continually disregarded or “bottled-up” eventually resurfaces through physical or emotional channels—i.e., ulcers, headaches, depression, and abuse of people or substances. Therefore, anger, like other emotions, is best expressed honestly and with respect for others. Those persons supporting the bereaved can facilitate emotional expression by simple listening and affirming that feelings are neither good nor bad—they just are.

While the survivor’s anger is often irrational, sometimes her or her anger is based on reality. Perhaps the deceased was an abusive parent, a deceitful lover, or a manipulative friend. Because it may be frightening to feel anger at one who has died, the griever may become mired in ambivalence, halting their progression through the grief process.

There are appropriate and healthy ways to vent anger generated by the death of a loved one. You may suggest some of the following to your clients:

- ❖ Sharing angry feelings with friends.
- ❖ Screaming and yelling while driving alone in a car.
- ❖ Trying to tear a phone book in half.
- ❖ Beating a pillow.
- ❖ Beating a mattress with a tennis racket.
- ❖ Twisting a towel while focusing on allowing your anger to flow from your hands and face.
- ❖ Writing an angry letter.
- ❖ Crying.
- ❖ Exercising strenuously

STAGE THREE:

Bargaining

When bargaining, the bereaved make promises of heroic reparations for their failures. Such commitments to change are made with the unconscious hope that these changes will allow the bereaved to avoid the reality of the loss. For example, "If only I hadn't ruined our last years together with my drinking...maybe if I never drink again I'll get another chance (with her?)."

Bargaining is often a last desperate attempt to change an unchangeable reality. Finally there comes the realization that bargaining will not work, and the bargainer begins to understand the futility of fighting the loss.

STAGE FOUR:

Depression

Depression may surface after exhaustive attempts to challenge loss through denial, anger and bargaining. For many survivors the feelings associated with the depression stage are the most painful of the grief process. At this stage the individual's defenses are weakened or abandoned, and for the first time, the depth and significance of loss is explored.

Depression may not dominate the grief process until months after the physical death of the loved one, at which time bereavement support is often diminished or non-existent. Because a lack of support increases the depressed survivor's feelings of isolation and hopelessness, availability of volunteer support is especially important at that time.

STAGE FIVE:

Acceptance – Growth

Acceptance is the beginning of the survivor's renewed commitment to his/her present and future. The decision to reconcile oneself to a loved one's death can be a difficult step for a number of reasons:

- ❖ Some people believe that grieving is a duty to the dead. Thus survivors may question whether the length and intensity of their grief is adequate to honor the loved one.
- ❖ After many months of grieving, being "grieved" becomes a part of one's identity. Even though grieving is painful work it may be difficult for survivors to relinquish the "safety" of grieving in order to make the new adjustments necessitated by acceptance.
- ❖ Bereaved persons often experience relief when the long process through denial, anger and depression ends with acceptance. Feelings of relief, while welcomed, can also produce guilt and self-doubt. Survivors wonder whether it is "normal" to feel relieved after a loved one's death—"Did I really love my spouse?"

Survivors may recognize the personal growth that accompanies the grief process and its resolution. Such survivors are strengthened by the knowledge that they are strong enough to have "made it" through a difficult adjustment period. An increased sense of responsibility and personal power, and enhanced awareness, sensitivity, spiritual integrity can be the positive results of trying experience.