

# The Five Stages of Grief

The five stages of grief were developed, not as a way of placing emotions into neat packages, but as a way of recognising the responses to loss that many people have.

There is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives.

The five stages are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live without the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. Not everyone goes through all of them, or goes through them in a prescribed order.

## Denial

Denial is seen as the first part of grieving that helps us to survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We go numb. We wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, why we should go on. We try to find a way to simply get through each day. Denial and shock help us to cope and make survival possible. Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. It's nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle.

These feelings are important; they are the psyche's protective mechanisms. Letting in all the feelings associated with loss at once, would be overwhelmingly emotional. Denial often comes in the form of our questioning our reality: Is it true? Did it really happen? Are they really gone? People find themselves telling the story of their loss over and over, which is one way that our mind deals with trauma. You begin to question the how and why. You turn inward as you begin the search for understanding. You explore the circumstances surrounding the loss. Did it have to happen? Did it have to happen that way? Could anything have prevented it? With each question the finality of the loss begins to gradually sink in. You are becoming stronger, and the denial is beginning to fade, but as you proceed, all the feelings you were denying begin to surface.

## Anger

This stage presents itself in many ways. Anger does not have to be logical or valid. You may be angry that you didn't see the loss coming, and when you did, nothing could stop it. You may be angry with the doctors that they were unable to save your loved one. You may also be angry that you're left behind, and that you should have had more time together. It was not supposed to happen, or at least not like this, not now. There's anger at the unexpected, undeserved, and unwanted situation in which you find yourself in.

Anger surfaces once you are feeling safe enough to know you will probably survive whatever comes. Then more feelings hit such as sadness, panic, hurt and loneliness. Loved ones and friends are often taken aback by the strength of these feelings, because they can surface just as you were beginning to function at a basic level again.

Anger is a necessary stage of the healing process. Be willing to feel your anger, even though it may seem endless, as the more you feel, the more it will begin to dissipate, and the more you will begin to heal. Anger is the emotion we are most used to managing. We often choose it to avoid the feelings underneath until we are ready to face them.

We usually know more about suppressing anger than feeling it. Tell a counsellor how angry you are. Share it with friends and family. Scream into a pillow. Find ways to get it out without hurting yourself or someone else. Try walking, swimming, gardening – any type of exercise that will help you externalise your anger. Do not bottle up anger inside, explore it instead. The anger is just another indication of the intensity of the love that has been lost.

## Bargaining

Before a loss it seems you will do anything if only your loved one may be spared. After a loss bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce, losing us in a maze of “if only...” and “what if...” statements. We want life returned to what it was, we want our loved one back. Guilt is often bargaining’s companion. The “if only’s” cause us to find fault with ourselves and what we “think” we could have done differently. We may even bargain with the pain. We will do anything not to feel the pain of this loss. We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt.

Bargaining can be an important reprieve from pain that occupies one’s grief. It can help our mind move from one state of loss to another, giving our psyche the time and space to adjust. Bargaining may fill the gaps that our strong emotions generally dominate, which often keep suffering at a distance. It allows us to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over.

Bargaining changes over time. Before death, we may start out bargaining for our loved one to be saved, later we may bargain that we might die instead of our loved one. After death, bargaining moves from the past to the future. We may bargain that if we live a life of good deeds, that we will see our loved ones again. We may bargain and ask for respite from illnesses, and that no other tragedies will visit our loved ones. A parent who loses a child may bargain that their other children remain safe and healthy.

As we move through the bargaining process, the mind alters past events while exploring all those “what if” and “if only” statements. Inevitably though, the mind comes to the same conclusion that the tragic reality is that the loved one has truly gone.

## Depression

This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on. Morning comes, but you don't care. It's time to get out of bed, but you have no desire to do so. Life feels pointless.

When we are grieving, people may wonder about us, and we may wonder about ourselves. The heavy, dark feelings of depression that come with grief, however normal, are often seen in our society as something to be treated, a state to be fixed, something to snap out of.

Some people's reaction to sad people is to try to cheer them up, to tell them to look at the bright side of life. This reaction is often an expression of that person's own needs and that person's inability to tolerate sadness over an extended period. A mourner should be allowed to experience their sorrow, and they will be grateful for those who can sit with them without telling them not to be sad.

Depression in grief is nature's way of keeping us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle. By slowing us down, we are allowed to take stock of the loss that has been endured. It makes us rebuild ourselves from the ground up. It clears the deck for growth. It takes us to a deeper place in our soul that we would not normally explore.

As tough as it is, depression can be dealt with in a paradoxical way. See it as a visitor. Make a place for your guest. Invite your depression to pull up a chair with you, and sit with it, without looking for a way to escape. When you allow yourself to experience depression, it will leave as soon as it has served its purpose in your loss. As you grow stronger, it may return from time to time, but this is how grief works.

## Acceptance

Acceptance is often confused with the notion of being alright or okay with what has happened. This is not the case. Most people don't ever feel okay or alright about the death of a loved one.

This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone, and recognising that this new reality is the permanent reality. We will never like this reality or make it okay, but eventually we accept it. It is the new norm with which we must learn to live. This is where our final healing and adjustment can take a firm hold, despite the fact that healing often looks and feels like an unattainable state.

As we heal, we learn who we are and who our loved one was in life. In a strange way, as we move through grief, healing can bring us closer to the person we loved. A new relationship begins. We put the loss into perspective, learning how to remember our loved ones, and commemorate the loss.

Finding acceptance may just be having more good days than bad. As we begin to live again and enjoy our life, we often feel that in doing so, we are betraying our loved one. We can never replace what has been lost, but we can make new connections, new relationships.

Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our own needs; we move, we change, we grow, we evolve. We may start to reach out to others and become involved in their lives. We invest in our friendships and in our relationship with our self. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time.

**Adapted from 'On Grief and Grieving'  
by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross & David Kessler (ed:2007)**