

The Five Stages of Grief

Excerpted from *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*

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<http://www.enotalone.com/article/5389.html>

"I know death is close," Kübler-Ross says at the end of the book, "but not quite yet. I lie here like so many people over the years, in a bed surrounded by flowers and looking out a big window.... I now know that the purpose of my life is more than these stages.... It is not just about the life lost but also the life lived."

In one of their final writing sessions, Kübler-Ross told Kessler, "The last nine years have taught me patience and the weaker and more bed-bound I become, the more I'm learning about receiving love."

On Grief and Grieving is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's final legacy, one that brings her life's work profoundly full circle.

Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance

The five stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but 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 — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order.

Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief's terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss.

Denial

Denial in grief has been misinterpreted over the years. When the stage of denial was first introduced in *On Death and Dying*, it focused on the person who was dying. In this book, *On Grief and Grieving*, the person who may be in denial is grieving the loss of a loved one. In a person who is dying, denial may look like

disbelief. They may be going about life and actually denying that a terminal illness exists. For a person who has lost a loved one, however, the denial is more symbolic than literal.

This does not mean that you literally don't know your loved one has died. It means you come home and you can't believe that your wife isn't going to walk in the door at any minute or that your husband isn't just away on a business trip. You simply can't fathom that he will never walk through that door again.

When we are in denial, we may respond at first by being paralyzed with shock or blanketed with numbness. The denial is still not *denial of the actual death*, even though someone may be saying, "I can't believe he's dead." The person is actually saying that, at first, because it is too much for his or her psyche.

This first stage of grieving 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. There is a grace in denial. It is 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 overwhelming emotionally. We can't believe what has happened because we actually *can't* believe what has happened. To fully believe at this stage would be too much.

The denial often comes in the form of our questioning our reality: Is it true? Did it really happen? Are they really gone? Think about the idea that you can't get over someone. It is more that you learn to live with the loss and not forget the person.

The finality of the loss begins to gradually sink in. She is not coming back. This time he didn't make it. With each question asked, you begin to believe they are really gone.

As you accept the reality of the loss and start to ask yourself questions, you are unknowingly beginning the healing process. 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 at your loved one that he didn't take better care of himself or anger that you didn't take better care of him. Anger does not have to be logical or valid. You may be angry that you didn't see this coming and when you did, nothing could stop it. You may be angry with the doctors for not being able to save someone so dear to you. You may be angry that bad things could happen to someone who meant so much to you.

You may also be angry that you're left behind and you should have had more time together. You know intellectually that your loved one didn't want to die. But emotionally, all you know is that he *did* die. It was not supposed to happen, or at least not now.

It is important to remember that the anger surfaces once you are feeling safe enough to know you will probably survive whatever comes. At first, the fact that you lived through the loss is surprising to you. Then more feelings hit, and anger is usually at the front of the line as feelings of sadness, panic, hurt, and loneliness also appear, stronger than ever. Loved ones and friends are often taken aback by these feelings, because they 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. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will heal. There are many other emotions under the anger and you will get to them in time, but 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. It may feel all-consuming, but as long as it doesn't consume you for a long period of time, it is part of your emotional management. It is a useful emotion until you've moved past the first waves of it. Then you will be ready to go deeper. In the process of grief and grieving you will have many subsequent visits with anger in its many forms.

Underneath anger is pain, *your* pain. It is natural to feel deserted and abandoned, but we live in a society that fears anger. People often tell us our anger is misplaced, inappropriate, or disproportionate. Some people may feel your anger is harsh or too much. It is their problem if they don't know how to deal with it. Unfortunately for them, they too will know the anger of loss someday. But for now, your job is to

honor your anger by allowing yourself to be angry. Scream if you need to. Find a solitary place and let it out.

We usually know more about suppressing anger than feeling it. Tell a counselor 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 helps you externalize your anger. Do not bottle up anger inside. Instead, explore it. The anger is just another indication of the intensity of your love.

Anger means you are progressing, that you are allowing all those feelings that were simply too much before to come to the surface. It is important to feel the anger without judging it, without attempting to find meaning in it. It may take many forms: anger at the health-care system, at life, at your loved one for leaving. Life is unfair. Death is unfair. Anger is a natural reaction to the unfairness of loss. Unfortunately, however, anger can isolate you from friends and family at the precise time you may need them the most.

The more anger you allow, the more feelings you will find underneath. Anger is the most immediate emotion, but as you deal with it, you will find other feelings hidden. Mostly you will find the pain of loss. The power of your anger may overwhelm you because for some it may be in proportion to the amount of lost love that it represents. Don't let anyone diminish the importance of feeling your anger fully. And don't let anyone criticize your anger, not even you.

Bargaining

Before a loss, it seems you will do anything if only your loved one may be spared. "Please, God," you bargain, "I will never be angry at my wife again if you'll just let her live." After a loss, bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce. "What if I devote the rest of my life to helping others? Then can I wake up and realize this has all been a bad dream?"

We become lost in a maze of "if only..." or "What if..." statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time: find the tumor sooner, recognize the illness more quickly, stop the accident from happening... if only, if only, if only.

Guilt is often bargaining's companion. The "if onlys" 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 help our mind move from one state of loss to another. It can be a way station that gives our psyche the time it may need 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. We may start out bargaining for our loved one to be saved. Later, we may even bargain that we might die instead of our loved one.

When we accept that they are going to die we may bargain that their death will be painless. After a death, bargaining often moves from the past to the future. We may bargain that we will see our loved ones again in heaven. We may bargain and ask for a respite from illnesses in our family, or that no other tragedies visit our loved ones. A mother who loses a child may bargain that her 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. Sadly, the mind inevitably comes to the same conclusion... the tragic reality is that our loved one is truly gone.

Depression

After bargaining, our attention moves squarely into the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It's important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone. Why go on at all?

Morning comes, but you don't care. A voice in your head says it is time to get out of bed, but you have no desire to do so. You may not even have a reason. Life feels pointless. To get out of bed may as well be climbing a mountain. You feel heavy, and being upright takes something from you that you just don't have to give.

If you find a way to get through your daily activities, each of them seems as empty and pointless as the last one. Why eat? Or why stop eating? You don't care enough

to care. If you could care about what was going on, it might scare you, so you don't want to care about anything.

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. Of course clinical depression, untreated, can lead to a worsening of one's mental state. But in grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle.

If grief is a process of healing, then depression is one of the many necessary steps along the way. If you have the awareness to recognize you are in depression or have been told by multiple friends you are depressed, your first response may be to resist and look for a way out. Seeking a way out of depression feels like going into a hurricane and sailing around the inside perimeter, fearful that there is no exit door.

As difficult as it is to endure, depression has elements that can be helpful in grief. It slows us down and allows us to take real stock of the loss. 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.

Most people's initial reaction to sad people is to try to cheer them up, to tell them not to look at things so grimly, to look at the bright side of life. This cheering-up reaction is often an expression of that person's own needs and that person's own inability to tolerate a long face over an extended period. A mourner should be allowed to experience his sorrow, and he will be grateful for those who can sit with him without telling him not to be sad. A mourner may be in the midst of life and yet not a participant in all the activities considered living: unable to get out of bed; tense, irritable, unable to concentrate; unable to care about anything. No matter what our surroundings may hold, we feel alone. This is what hitting the bottom feels like. You wonder if you will ever feel anything again or if this is what life will be like forever.

Acceptance

Acceptance is often confused with the notion of being all right or okay with what has happened. This is not the case. Most people don't ever feel okay or all right about the loss of a loved one. This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent

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reality. We will never like this reality or make it okay, but eventually we accept it. We learn to live with 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.

Healing looks like remembering, recollecting, and reorganizing. We may cease to be angry with God; we may become aware of the commonsense reasons for our loss, even if we never actually understand the reasons. We the survivors begin to realize sadly that it was our loved one's time to die. Of course it was too soon for us, and probably too soon for him or her, too. Perhaps he was very old or full of pain and disease. Perhaps her body was worn down and she was ready for her journey to be over. But *our* journey still continues. It is not yet time for us to die; in fact, it is time for us to heal.

We must try to live now in a world where our loved one is missing. In resisting this new norm, at first we may want to maintain life as it was before a loved one died. In time, through bits and pieces of acceptance, however, we see that we cannot maintain the past intact. It has been forever changed and we must readjust. We must learn to reorganize roles, reassign them to others or take them on ourselves. The more of your identity that was connected to your loved one, the harder it will be to do this.

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 brings us closer to the person we loved. A new relationship begins. We learn to live with the loved one we lost. We start the process of reintegration, trying to put back the pieces that have been ripped away.

Finding acceptance may be just 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 meaningful relationships, new interdependencies. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our 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 ourselves. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time.

