

The Five Stages of Grief

Adapted from the writings and ideas
of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

Many of us do not want to talk about something as personal as grief. We have a difficult time sharing this very individual and intimate journey. I think sometimes because we have a difficult time sharing, we do not realize that there are many of us who are grieving today and any day. I think also, because we have a difficult time sharing, we do not realize that our grief experiences are shared by many others. While each person's grief journey is unique and personal, there is also a shared grief experience. The more we share our journey, the more we realize we are not alone, and there are others who care and know what we feel.

Chaplain Vince Marolla

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross was one of the pioneers of getting us to talk about and look at grief. When she looked at grief and the grieving process, she saw 5 stages that are essential for healing and wholeness. These 5 stages are also known as the “grief cycle.”

Kübler-Ross never intended for these to be a rigid series of sequential or uniformly timed steps. The five stages of grief are not as much a process as they are a model or a framework. Not everyone who grieves will experience all five of the ‘grief cycle’ stages. For some who grieve, some stages might not be experienced at all. For others, some of the stages might be revisited – repeatedly. The transition between the stages can be more of an ebb and flow of backwards and forwards rather than a linear progression. Since each individual’s grief and other reactions to emotional trauma are as individual as a fingerprint, no two people will take the journey in the same sequence and/or time.

In this sense you might wonder what the purpose of the model is if it can vary so much from person to person. The simple answer is that the model acknowledges that there is an individual pattern of reactive emotional responses which people feel when coming to terms with death, bereavement, and great loss or trauma, etc. The model recognizes that people have to pass through **their own individual journey** of coming to terms with death and bereavement, etc. After, and only after, the journey, there is generally an acceptance of reality, which then enables the person to cope.

The model is perhaps a way of explaining how and why ‘time heals’, or how ‘life goes on’. And as with any aspect of our own or other people’s emotions, when we know more about what is happening, then dealing with it is usually made a little easier.

Again, while Kübler-Ross’ focus was on death and bereavement, the grief cycle model is a useful perspective for understanding our own and other people’s emotional reaction to personal trauma and change, irrespective of cause.

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1 – Denial – Denial is a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept facts, information, reality, etc., relating to the situation concerned. It is a defense mechanism and it is perfectly natural. Some people can become locked in this stage when dealing with a traumatic change that can be ignored. Death of course is not particularly easy to avoid or evade indefinitely, but often we can get stuck in denial of a death.

2 – Anger – Anger can manifest itself in different ways. People dealing with emotional upset can be angry with themselves, and/or with others, especially those close to them. Often times, people in grief misdirect their anger lashing out in grief and making other loved ones the target of anger. Knowing this can help us keep detached and non-judgmental when experiencing the anger of someone who is very upset.

3 – Bargaining – Traditionally the bargaining stage for people facing death or the death of a loved one can involve attempting to bargain with whatever God the person believes in. People facing less serious trauma can bargain or seek to negotiate a compromise. For example “Can we still be friends?” when facing a break-up. Bargaining rarely provides a sustainable solution, especially if it’s a matter of life or death.

4 – Depression – This can also be referred to as preparatory grieving. In a way it’s the dress rehearsal or the practice run for the “aftermath” although this stage means different things depending on whom it involves. It’s a sort of acceptance with emotional attachment. It’s natural to feel sadness and regret, fear, uncertainty, etc. It shows that the person has at least begun to accept the reality.

Since depression is both physical and emotional, if you experience symptoms of depression, talk to your doctor about possible medications that can assist you in getting beyond depression.

5 – Acceptance – Again this stage definitely varies according to the person’s situation, although broadly it is an indication that there is some emotional detachment and objectivity. People dying can enter this stage a long time before the people they leave behind, who must necessarily pass through their own individual stages of dealing with the grief.

(This is based on the Grief Cycle model first published in On Death & Dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 1969. Interpretation by Alan Chapman 2006-2009.)



This resource is produced as a part of the grief ministry of First Lutheran Church, Galesburg by Chaplain Vince Marolla, Beacon of Hope Hospice. If you want to reprint and pass this on, please use this source information.