

## STAGES OF THE GRIEF PROCESS

It is important that we understand what is involved in the grief process. We will all go through it and many of us already have. A fact of life is that the longer we live, the more death we experience around us.

Stages of the grief process include:

**Shock.** This is the body/mind's way of saving you from the devastating pain of the loss, at least initially. It is a blessing at best, but at worst can become a long-term numbness to feelings that resembles a sort of living death. It will pass naturally as long as the other components of the grief process are honored.

**Denial.** This is your mind's attempt to protect you from the reality of the loss. You may lie to yourself and think about the person as if they were still alive. A certain period of denial is normal but if prolonged, it can keep you stuck and prevent resolution. There are many forms of denial, as varied as people are different from each other.

**Anger.** When you lose someone you love, it is natural to be angry for a period of time. You may be angry with the person for leaving you, angry with yourself for what you did not do to save them or angry with God for taking them away. You may just be angry at the unfairness and injustice of life. Get all of the [anger management help](#) you need here.

**Guilt.** There seems to be a human tendency to blame yourself when something happens to a loved one. In loving someone, you automatically take some degree of responsibility for her or his welfare. It is only natural to question yourself for a period of time after your loved ones die. This is a normal part of the grief process, but it is extremely important that you move through it and don't get stuck in this stage.

**Pain And Sorrow.** These feelings often exist throughout the entire grief process, and are the core feelings of grief. In the early stages, however, you are often distracted from your sorrow by denial, anger, guilt and the resulting confusion. Fear can also be a tremendous barrier to the experience of sorrow, triggering all of the defense mechanisms. To truly face and experience the pain and sorrow is necessary and healthy however, and it moves you forward in the grief process. Working with love is the key for moving through this phase, because only love has the power to move us to the depths of our being where the greatest loss is registered.

**Release And Resolution.** This stage of the grief process is accompanied by a sense of acceptance of the reality of the loss, a sense of "letting go," which might be letting go of a person or [letting go of a relationship](#). There may also be a degree of forgiveness that occurs in this phase. The denial, guilt and anger stages are over, and the pain and sorrow is not as intense as it was before. Many people ask, "How long does it take?" The answer is different according to the severity of the loss and the health of the individual who is grieving. Grieving moves in cycles, and it may seem as if we are through for a substantial period of time. A birthday, anniversary or another loss can bring back many of the same feelings that were there when our loved one died. Any loss or low emotional period can bring back the feelings of loss, particularly if you have not reached resolution. When the release finally occurs, your entire body will feel it. I have watched many people go through emotional release in their grieving, and I am convinced that it is as much a physical, non-verbal process as it is verbal and conscious.

**Return To the Willingness To Love.** This is the final stage of the grieving process. Healing has occurred, and the grieving person is able to laugh again and to get involved in life. Fear can slow you down or even stop you at this point, because new love means the risk of new loss. By honoring and completing all aspects of the grief process,

however, you will overcome your fear and move forward. This occurs through an appreciation for yourself and the life you are left to live. Nurturing your inner child is an excellent tool to use to help you through the entire grief process, and particularly as you move back out "into the world" after a period of grieving. Part of the return to love also includes remembering the love you felt for the one you lost. The love lives on and the anger, guilt, pain and sorrow fade away.

This final stage of the grief process is ultimately a spiritual one. It is a fact that all of us on this planet will die. You need to have some way of living, laughing and loving with this reality. That's where spirituality comes in. True security cannot be found in another person or in any external circumstances. You have to turn within, to your own concept of the infinite, to ultimately find peace and security in a life that is only temporary in its tangible form.

## **GRIEVING IS AN ACT OF LOVE**

The greater the love you feel for someone or the greater the emotional investment in a given situation, the greater the sense of loss you feel when death, transition or tragedy occurs. The depth of grief you experience is directly proportional to the depth of love experienced, invested or needed. Grieving is actually an aspect of love, and healthy grieving is an act of love and remembering love.

The reason that anger, shock and denial interrupt and in some cases stop the grief process is because they take you away from love. That is what they are designed to do as protective mechanisms.

Here's the real clincher about love and the grief process—remembering, writing about and talking about love takes you directly into the pain. As this happens however, all of the unconscious defense mechanisms designed to protect you from pain are activated. This is where the anger, shock and denial come in. The instinctual reaction of avoiding pain is natural. If you allow this to dominate however, you will never complete a grieving process. We must be conscious of our instincts, and act according to our wisdom.

Ultimately it is only a focus on love that gives you the strength and depth of emotion necessary for moving into your pain, releasing your sorrow and completing the grief process.

**Here are some ideas and skills** you can use to facilitate your own grief process:

**Understand that grief comes in waves.** When the initial shock wears off, the first wave might feel overwhelming. Fortunately, each wave of grief eventually subsides, just as waves in the ocean do. You can therefore comfort yourself during each wave of sorrow with the awareness that "this too shall pass". The better you respond to the waves of grief, the more quickly they pass and the sooner you will complete your grieving process.

**The grief process lasts from a few months to several years,** depending on the type of loss experienced. That means the waves will continue to come and go for that period of time. Fight them and they will just get stronger. Learn to go with them and move through them effectively, and they will subside more quickly.

**Some crying can be and even needs to be done alone,** whereas aspects of the grief process require that you do at least part of your crying in the presence of trusted

loved ones.

**You absolutely must know how to cry.** Crying can actually be seen as a skill, in that some people know how to do it, some don't, and it can be taught. Here are some exercises to help you cry if you have difficulty doing so:

--Go into a dark or dimly lit room, where you will not be interrupted. Curl up on a bed or on the floor in a pile of pillows. Let your emotions and the sensations in your body be your guide, they will tell you what to do if you have the sensitivity to listen.

--Make a vocal sound that matches with the feelings of sorrow and pain in your stomach, heart and throat. This may come out as a wail, a whimper, a howl or a roar. It is essential that you let these sounds out, as they give you emotional release that otherwise is just not possible.

--Deep, long sobbing is the key to powerful emotional release. That's what you're going for in the effort to cry. Quietly leaking a few tears is better than nothing, but it won't get to the heart of the matter. When you experience deep loss your body needs to sob, deep and long until you feel a release and a sense of relief. You may need to do this several times during the grieving process. Sobbing occurs as a kind of rapid coughing or convulsing rhythm in your belly, so the belly must be relaxed for this to happen. Relaxing your stomach and breathing deeply can often facilitate crying.

--Sometimes there is a powerful layer of anger or even rage surrounding sorrow. Because of this, anger release work may sometimes be necessary to allow crying to start. I have seen literally hundreds of clients go into crying after powerful anger release. The verbal statements that might go with anger release for grieving might be "No, no, no..." or "Why did you leave me?"

--Grieving rituals are extremely important for those of us in cultures and societies that do not have them. Here are some ideas of rituals and ceremonies that may be useful to you, beyond the funeral process that most families utilize:

--Your own private grieving ceremony will allow you to process your feelings and move through your waves of grief on your own schedule, requiring nothing of others.

Following are some recommendations:

1. Go into a private space where you will not be interrupted.
2. Put on some appropriate music that will remind you of the person or that will connect with the feelings you want to move through.
3. Light candles to set a sacred space, and to create a quiet and reverent mood.
4. Take out photographs, videotapes, audiotapes, cards, letters and memorabilia that contain or remind you of your lost loved one or of the situation you are grieving. Place these around you on the floor or on a table in front of you.
5. Talk out loud to the departed, or to anyone associated with your loss. You can also write letters (that you may or may not send to anyone still alive) expressing all of your feelings.
6. Stay in this space until you feel some sense of release or resolution. Understand that you may need to do this several times during your grief process, or in some cases one such ritual will be sufficient.
7. Ceremonies and rituals that involve family and loved ones also affected can be very healing. Some examples include:

--Releasing balloons in a park or floating a candle down a stream or river.

--Storytelling ceremonies, in which you and your group get together to swap memories of the departed. Be aware that if these stories focus on anger, guilt or denial they can do more harm than good. While it is necessary to move through these aspects of grief, the purpose of such a gathering is to focus on love, release, forgiveness, healing and letting go.

-- Memorial services that include combinations of the above elements, for the purpose of

honoring the departed and the love felt by those left behind.

I would also like to add another important comment about grief work. The approach I have outlined here can be applied to many kinds of losses. Here is a list of losses many of us suffer which necessitate a period of grieving:

- Death
- Divorce
- Loss of innocence through physical or sexual abuse
- Loss of respect for your body because of abuse
- Loss of love through abandonment or rejection
- Loss of childhood through being required to take on too much responsibility too soon in life
- Loss of health through illness, injury or aging
- Loss of job
- Loss of money through investment downturns and/or changes in the economy
- Loss due to moving away from a home that you loved
- Loss of community because of a geographical move

Even the ending of bad relationships can sometimes involve a grieving process. Why? Because it didn't start out as a bad relationship--you lost the dream of what you hoped it would be.

You may be able to think of other types of losses that you or others have suffered. The important point to keep in mind is that you do not have to suffer from these losses for the rest of your life. You can take charge by moving through your own grief to a point of peace and resolution, becoming wiser and stronger in the process.

### **The Second Wave of Grief**

The second wave of grief has hit me. I have been through all the so-called stages and then some — only to find myself at the very beginning once more. It's beyond a joke now, I keep thinking. OK, she died, it was the way it was, I managed to ride through the shock, the agony, the chaos and emptiness and finally a kind of saying goodbye, and a kind of acceptance, and she fell into a different place in my life. But now, a few months on — after all that work I did — she's still dead!

I don't know quite what I was expecting, to be able to pick up the phone and tell her how well I had done and compare notes as to how it all was for her? To wake up? To get back to normal after this drama that shook us both for awhile — after all, everything is temporary, isn't it? Isn't that the whole point? It felt strangely comforting when I grasped it. But this is something else. This is constant. This thing goes on forever. Time becomes ruthlessly linear. It will take me further and further away from my memories, the things I have taken over from her will finish or get lost or broken. This whole event will run out of steam but she will remain dead and gone

Who thought up something like this? I have never believed in a God organising the world, but this seems so perverse that someone must have invented it. Irrational anger,

irrational thoughts, while all the feelings make sense. A terrible kind of sense. But thoughts can't deal with this. They start trying to make deals with non-existent gods and inanimate objects. They become extraordinarily creative. They rewind and fast forward with alacrity, sometimes at the same time. They start placing themselves at the centre of the world. I feel as if I am frankly on a completely different planet to other people. Those who have been through "it" too often cry when they see me and repeat that sentence "you have to go through it to understand". Understand what? I don't understand a thing. I suppose they mean the intensity of it. How the impossible turns out to be true.

What can my "therapeutic goal" possibly be, but to survive? Just endure? What can the cure actually be but love? I know the last tasks of mourning are re-organising and coming to some kind of acceptance. But although I am sure that will happen, it also misses the point. It will allow me to make new connections, I know, give me something like a new life, a new strength probably, too. But if I forget this state, then all that organising will have somehow missed the point. The point is completely inexpressible, and extraordinarily painful; it's about being a human animal, and something else too.

I still hold the conviction that one day I will sit in a cafe on the "other side" (that expression doesn't seem like a cliché anymore, it feels pretty accurate) and talk over death with my family and friends, their deaths and mine. I have rehearsed too many of the conversations already. How could he have been so stupid? Weren't they unlucky? What an awful thing to happen! You did really well, no really, you did. That was a scary moment wasn't it! But here we are now, all safe and together. While I do not really believe this, my mind has to. That's how it is for me today. Waiting on the beach, for the tide to go out.

## **Community Loss: The Grief Response**

### **Each person's grief is different...**

Each person in your family or in your community will react to loss through death in their own way. There is no single way that is 'normal.' This does not mean that they grieve less deeply or with less pain. It means they are who they are, and your way does not work for them. Understanding these differences will help to avoid feelings of frustration or anger at others because they don't seem to be outwardly grieving or they don't seem to care. They may be grieving in ways that you don't see. Their grief may be very private.

### **The wave of grief...**

When a boy found his sister's teddy bear behind the VCR he stood in the middle of the room and cried and cried. He was feeling the wave of sadness, helplessness and anger over the loss of his sister who had died two months before. He had no warning that the wave of grief was going to happen. It just did.

When a man, shopping in the produce department of a grocery store,

thought about his wife who had died the previous year, he began to cry. Again, he had no warning and he couldn't have stopped it if he had tried. The memories and the grief washed over him.

You may also experience this wave of grief. Even though publicly expressing sadness after the funeral is not encouraged, people are becoming more educated about grief and loss. You may be surprised at the support you receive from those around you. Family and others close to you may really want to help, if asked. Death will always be a hard thing to accept.

### **Turning feelings off...**

Sometimes, when there is great emotional pain from loss, the only way to protect ourselves is to go numb. In psychological terms, this numbness is called denial or shock and, early on, it is a necessary protection for emotional health.

And the thought of ever feeling anything again may be frightening. Talking with someone about the loss is a very useful way to relieve the numbness so that you can carry on with life.

### **Turning thoughts off...**

It may seem impossible to actually believe that the death has occurred. This is also a way the mind protects itself against this unimaginable pain. As time passes, you will be able to slowly accept the reality of your loss.

### **Turning feelings into actions...**

Some people find it hard to express deep feelings. Instead, they choose to keep themselves busy with hard work. Or, they get involved in worthy campaigns like Mothers Against Drunk Driving to help create something positive from the death.

### **Turning feelings into physical symptoms...**

Other people may want to, but not know how to, express their feelings of loss. When grief stays inside, it can show itself physically: headache, itchy skin, nausea, neck or chest pain, insomnia, changes in appetite, to name a few. These conditions should always be checked by your physician. However, if there is no physical reason for the symptoms, consider talking about your loss with someone you trust.

### **Turning feelings into spiritual questions...**

You may experience spiritual reactions to your loss. Many people question their faith as they feel the sense of injustice at their child's death. Again, it is wise to discuss these issues of death with your spiritual advisor or another trusted person.

## **Community Loss: Our Response to Loss**

When we think about someone dying, or are dealing with death, a natural

reaction that we may knowingly or unknowingly have is to think about our own mortality. In other words, we may react by questioning if this could have happened to us. It's hard to think about death, our own or someone else's.

The North American culture doesn't really encourage us to think or talk about death. We prefer to focus on the positive things in life. Sometimes this leads us to have an unrealistic attitude about life - that we can stay young and alive forever; that we will never die.

So when someone does die, we can't believe it! We say, "No, that can't be." We don't want to believe it, thinking it must be a mistake or a very sick joke. As the reality of the death sinks in, the sadness, confusion and anger begins to happen. We don't know what to do or say when dealing with death.

Sometimes, in a community, someone very young dies tragically or someone well-known and respected dies or more than one person dies at the same time. There is then a community response to loss. It is then that the community may respond as one.

People may gather at the site of the death, bringing flowers or other tokens of remembrance. Flags may be flown at half-mast. Relief funds or disaster funds are collected. People get together to share their grief or, in some way, help the families or other survivors of the death.

When a community as a whole experiences a loss, the community responds in their grief. Being together and sharing the experience helps the healing when dealing with death.

## **Grief Work**

### **What Are Your Rules For Grieving?**

It seems as if everyone has their own rules for grieving. What do you grieve? How long do you grieve? How are you supposed to act when you grieve? When many people think about grieving they think of the stereotypical widow wearing black for a certain amount of time. Often grieving is only considered to occur when we have suffered a major loss. We are told we should just feel sadness while we are grieving and that feeling any joy is disrespectful to those we lost or shows that we really did not love them. The truth is that we all grieve differently for each loss that we have. Sometimes we recover quickly and sometimes it takes longer than we expect. Sometimes we feel intense grief over something we think is small and little grief when we think we have had a major loss. In short, there is no set pattern for grief.

## **The Frequency of Grief**

We go through a grieving process whenever we have a loss of any kind. Some say that whenever we make a decision and choose one thing over another we grieve the loss of the one we chose against. If this is the case then we grieve on a daily basis. Certainly it is the major losses that we feel the most, but not acknowledging the smaller losses can reduce the joy we feel in our lives.

## **Stages of Grief**

The most common theories of grief are based on the Five Stages of Grief as developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her five stages include:

1. **Denial** - The disbelief that the loss occurred.
2. **Anger** - The expression of our powerlessness to change the loss.
3. **Bargaining** - Looking for a way to reverse the loss.
4. **Depression** - Deep sadness as a result of the loss.
5. **Acceptance** - Coming to terms with the loss.

It is quite common for these stages to occur out of order and some believe that not all happen all the time. I believe we always go through all five stages but sometimes the intensity of a stage is so low or so short lived we don't always notice it.

## **Waves of Grief**

The emotions of grief often come in waves. At times we feel them and at other times there are gone or weaker. Once we have had a break from our grief and felt other emotions then we feel another wave of the grief. The different waves can vary in size and intensity and are usually unpredictable as to when they will hit us or how long they will last. Typically, over time, they get smaller and less frequent. It is not uncommon to feel a wave of grief years after the last wave.

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*Grief is a tidal wave that over takes you, smashes down upon you with unimaginable force, sweeps you up into its darkness, where you tumble and crash against unidentifiable surfaces, only to be thrown out on an unknown beach, bruised, reshaped... Grief will make a new person out of you, if it doesn't kill you in the making.*

*Stephanie Ericsson*



*Grief is a powerful, universal feeling, but it is survivable.*

*Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FAAETS*

Each of person travels on his or her own unique journey in experiencing of the loss. Each person's experience of loss will have subtle nuances that will make it unlike any other loss, but the commonality--the grief response--with the intense feelings of loss, anger, depression, loneliness, fear, frustration, desperation, these are emotions that others will have also felt, endured and survived. What we have in common is that the grief response is felt most intensely by the heart. There is a common "language" those who have experienced grief speak, one that can often be understood without words. Many times all that is required to let someone know you have been there, that you understand their grief is just a understanding look, a gentle touch on the arm, a reassuring hug or a heart-felt note.

It is in the sharing of the losses of many hearts that our own heart begins to heal. As the grieving person recognizes that others have lived through loss and survived he or she will begin to realize that he/she can survive their own loss.

Sharing the losses, telling the grief story or expressing the feeling in writing or other creative endeavors, no matter how painful, is important in the healing process. Healing will be recognized when the grieving person is at a point of being able to share with those earlier in the process. With this knowledge the heart grows stronger, more sensitive and more understanding of the suffering of others. The quotation by Dr. Robert Schuller sums this up:



*Our grief always brings a gift.  
It's the gift of greater sensitivity and compassion  
for others.  
We learn to rise above our own grief by reaching  
out  
and lessening the grief of others.*