

Understanding The Stages Of Grief

Everyone experiences grief differently.

Many people who lose a friend or loved one, end a relationship or lose something that has meaning and importance to them, experience several stages of grief as they deal with a loss.

Counsellors who work with people as they grieve have noticed the different ways that people cope with the loss.

There are some commonalities including distinct stages such as denial, anger, and depression.

There are a few more to name, but what you may not know is that these stages aren't about the grief of someone dying, but rather something extremely different. Read on to find out what these stages.

What Does Grief Look and Feel Like?

If you're grieving a loss, you may have a lot of questions. Am I supposed to be feeling this way? Is it wrong for me to feel a certain way when others are feeling differently? How much am I supposed to be feeling at this point? The key to recovery is understanding where you are in the grief process.

Grief is experienced in many ways. Emotions can range from anger to sadness or even numbness. Everything you feel is valid, and despite how intense your emotions may be, you're most likely progressing through the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We will further cover these topics and other important aspects of grief later in the article.

Should I Be Reaching Out for Help?

Some people will move through each of the phases of grief on their own, but others may need help. Grief can be debilitating for those dealing with heavy losses, and there's the possibility of developing mental health disorders.

No matter the hardship, grief is a universal experience.

It's not a matter of whether you'll grieve, but when. Many have sought help for their grief, and research shows that those who have reached out for guidance have responded positively.

But what is normal to experience during grief, what should you expect, and what may indicate a developing or underlying problem that needs help?

Important Things to Know about Grief

Before we dive into the five main stages of grief, and additional stages presented in other models, here are some important things about grief you should know.

Types of Loss

Most people associate the word 'grief' with the sadness that surrounds the death of a loved one. Yet people can experience grief after many other losses, including a breakup, losing a job or a home, having a part of the body like an arm or leg removed, being diagnosed with a terminal illness, or having to drop out of college. All of these situations can lead to a feeling of loss and may add an extra layer of complexity that therapy could address.

The Grief Process

You may experience the stages of grief in any order and any number of times. You may feel sad at the beginning, move on to anger, and then return to sadness. Take your time to grieve. Allow yourself to do it in your own unique way, but remember that help is available if you feel grief is significantly impacting your life.

What You Probably Don't Know about the Stages of Grief

Many people don't realize that the stages of grief were developed to explain the emotional trajectory of people with a terminal illness.

The stages originally appeared in a book called *On Death and Dying*, by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. In this book, Kübler-Ross writes about the stages of death: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

She did not develop the stages to describe the loss people experience when a loved one dies—only the experiences of the terminally ill, but after some time, people used these phases to explain personal losses as well. Below, the different stages are explained.

Denial

When you're in denial about the loss, you try to convince yourself or others the event hasn't happened or isn't permanent. You know the facts, of course. If your spouse has died, you might accept that it happened but then believe for a time that their death means nothing to you. If your parents have divorced, you might try to get them back together even after they've moved on to other relationships. Following a job loss, you might go back to work thinking they didn't really mean it when they fired you.

Anger

You may be angry with the person who left you, or you may feel angry with yourself. You might find yourself shouting at people, or showing irritation at everything from minor inconveniences to significant letdowns. This stage can happen at any time, even after you go through a period of acceptance. The benefit of the grief stages is that they help you deal with the loss and move on. Anger can energize you to do just that.

Bargaining

At some point, you may find yourself trying to reclaim what you've lost. This part of the stages of grief help cope with the loss. People often promise they'll live a better life if the tragedy is undone. A child may promise to pick up their toys and stop arguing with their siblings if their

parents will get back together. Bargaining is a stage that sometimes brings up uncomfortable discussions that go nowhere.

Depression

You may feel sad and cry often. You might notice changes in your appetite or sleep patterns. You might have unexplained aches and pains. This stage can occur in a breakup, in the death of a loved one, or any other loss, but it's a situational depression that may soon pass naturally as you move toward acceptance.

Acceptance

The last of the Dr. Kübler-Ross stages of grief is acceptance. You understand what you've lost and recognize how important that thing or person was to you. You no longer feel angry about it, and you're finished with bargaining to get it back. You're ready to start rebuilding your life.

Complete acceptance brings peace-but often this stage is never complete. Instead, you might feel sad during death anniversaries or angry when you feel life would work out so much better if you just had that thing or person with you now. When you accept the loss fully, you'll understand the stages of grief better.

Note: There are no rules as to when, how or in what order you may or may not experience the stages as outlined above. Your journey is personal to you and there are no wrong or right ways to grief or loss.

The Seven Stages of Loss

Dr. Kübler-Ross refined her model to include seven stages of loss. The 7 stages of loss model is a more in-depth analysis of the components of the grief process. These seven stages include shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance. Kubler-Ross added the two steps as an extension of the grief cycle. In the shock phase, you feel paralysed and emotionless. In the testing stage, you try to find realistic solutions for coping with the loss and rebuilding your life.

Other Variations

In addition to the five-stage and seven-stage models, you may have heard about the four stages of grief or the six stages of grief. John Bowlby, a British psychologist, studied the stages of grief and loss before Dr. Kübler-Ross presented her five stages of grief. His work was with children with attachment issues.

One of these, of course, is grief. Bowlby's 4 stages of grief are: 1) shock and numbness, 2) yearning and searching, 3) despair and disorganization, 4) reorganization and recovery.

The 6 stages of grief is merely an extension of Kubler-Ross's original five-stage process. The only difference is that the shock stage starts before denial. What are the actual stages of grief then? That is a question only you can answer. The stages of grief you experience might be different from someone else's.

Getting stuck?

Sometimes the grief process doesn't go well. The bereaved may become stuck in one stage of grief, unwilling or unable to move through the process. In a worst-case scenario, the person can continue to be angry, sad, or even in denial for the rest of their life.

When this happens, they usually need to talk to a grief counsellor before they can move out of that stage. Otherwise, the intense pain might continue over the course of many years.

Also, they may miss opportunities to build a new life that can bring happiness in the here and now.

Even if you don't become stuck in one particular stage of grief and loss, you might get stuck in the cycle. You move through the stages, but then move back to the previous ones, never quite able to free yourself. This return to earlier stages usually means you haven't thoroughly dealt with them yet. In cases of extreme loss, this may be necessary for a time. The shock, denial, anger, and bargaining can eventually lead to acceptance.

When Grief Doesn't End

Grief counselling is available to help people who are overwhelmed after a loss. Whether you're stuck in your grief cycle, in one stage of grief, or are dealing with issues stemming from your grief, such as depression, starting your own grief counselling journey will provide you with the necessary resources to help you recover.

Talking to a grief counsellor allows you to work through your grief in a safe and comfortable setting when it works best for you.