

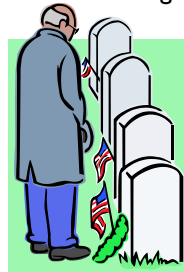
Recognizing the Stages of Grief

Whether it's the passing of a 99-year-old grandmother, a 59-year-old coworker, or a 19-year-old nephew, the loss of a family member or friend is a heartbreaking fact of life with which we all must contend at one time or another.

How each person works through the psychological and physiological effects that follow any great loss is as individual as the people affected by that loss. Grief is an ongoing and demanding process. There is no script for grieving, no fixed pattern to its swift emotional currents, no consistent timetable to estimate its duration.

Although the grieving process cannot be reduced to a tidy list of definitions, goals, and strategies, it can be described in terms of emotional states and stages. With the 1969 publication of her book *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced what has since become widely known as the "five stages of grief." The discrete stages she identified have proven to be an effective template for understanding how people navigate loss and tragedy:

- Denial** – This isn't happening to me!
- Anger** – Why is this happening to me?
- Bargaining** – I promise I'll be a better person if...
- Depression** – I don't care anymore.
- Acceptance** – I'm ready for whatever comes.



Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal. In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through *any* of these stages. If you do, you probably won't experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don't worry about what you "should" be feeling or which stage you're supposed to be in.

We tend to think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but it often involves physical problems including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity, weight loss or gain, aches and pains, and insomnia.

It is important to note that the grieving process applies not only to the death of a loved one, but to any traumatic event. The loss of a limb, surviving a life-threatening illness, the death of a family pet, the end of a relationship, and even an intense personal disappointment can induce grief. The causes vary widely, but the healing process remains the same. Grief is not a disease. There is no magic pill or quick fix. Remember that grief is a long, agonizing process, but it does have an end.

It's a Fact:

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 2,423,712 deaths registered in the United States in 2007. A grim statistic to be sure, but also a reminder that loss is an inevitable part of life for which one can and should be prepared.

Grief and Children

Although children do not possess the life experience and emotional maturity to understand death and other traumatic losses as an adult would, they are far more perceptive and intuitive than we often give them credit for being. Kids know when their parents are sad, angry, confused, or lying to them.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, author of *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential—and Endangered*, recommends that parents or other caregivers not be afraid to talk about death or loss. Children do not benefit from being misled or told to "not think about it."

Share some of your own feelings and thoughts, but remember that in the midst of distressing circumstances, children are not very capable of processing complex or abstract information. Be prepared to repeat the same information again and again.

Invite children to talk about the feelings they are experiencing, share age-appropriate information with them, and let them take the lead as to when, how long, and how much is discussed. If children sense that you are upset by the loss, they may not bring the topic up even when they want to.

It can be very helpful for children to know that you have been affected by the event and are willing to talk about how you feel. You might find that serving as a guide and role model for a child comforts you as much as it does them.