

## Grief

### • Individual

- Every person is a unique accumulation of their family of origin, life experience, personality etc.
- Consequently, every person responds to loss/crisis differently.
  - Some spring into action with remarkable ability to address issues head on; others feel incapacitated.
  - Some weep immediately and frequently; some weep weeks or months later; some never weep.
  - There is neither a “universal” nor “right” way or duration to grieve, and there is no shame in having a response that’s different from others.
- Honour your own grieving process and journey, and honour others’ grieving process and journey.
  - Resist any inclination towards “shoulds”, comparison, or judgment.

### • Stages/Characteristics

- In 1969, Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote a book called *On Death and Dying*, inspired by her work with terminally ill patients.
- She articulated the following stages of grief as a result:
  - Denial
  - Anger
  - Bargaining
  - Depression
  - Acceptance
- The stages are better understood as *characteristics*. They’re not necessarily linear (you may experience them out of sequence, cycle through or repeat various ones), nor are they intended to describe *all* experiences of grief – grief is as unique and atypical as each loss and each person who it affects.
- Rather, the stages/characteristics are meant to provide a framework for understanding what you *might* experience in the face of loss – to enhance your knowledge of “grief’s terrain.”

### • Denial

- Helps us survive/cope by “pacing our feelings of grief” and “letting in only as much as we can handle.”
- It is a way of delaying pain because no one wants to bear the immediate, taxing mental and emotional consequences of honestly facing loss.
  - We are tempted to minimize or spiritualize things (e.g. “It was probably a misunderstanding” or “God is doing X and that’s why this is happening”).
  - We are tempted to tell ourselves what we *should* feel as opposed to honouring what we *actually* feel (e.g. “God is X so I should feel X” or “Why am I not feeling more X about this?”).
- Denial is an experience of shock/numbness/disbelief (e.g. “Can this really be happening?”).
- All these questions are completely valid and understandable in grief.
- The priority of denial is getting through each day, with minimum change or disruption to your normal life.

- **Anger**
  - Brings a sense of “structure” to grief.
  - We find an object to focus our negative emotions towards – a person, a situation, God etc.
  - We assign blame somewhere or to someone we believe is responsible for the loss.
    - Suffering that has no cause is excruciating – anger removes the sense of arbitrariness relative to suffering by clarifying a source or origin (e.g. “This happened because of X”). Ironically, anger can be comforting.
  - There’s always a deeper pain/emotion underneath anger.
    - Anger often lowers us into more subterranean emotional territory – in this sense, it is *helpful* and needs to be listened and paid attention to.
  
- **Bargaining**
  - “If only” and “What if” statements (e.g. “If only I prayed harder/checked in more, this wouldn’t have happened” or “What if I prayed more/was more diligent with everyone and everything from now on?”).
  - We’re willing to do almost anything to negotiate the terms of reality in our favour.
  - A sense of *guilt* underpins the experience of bargaining.
  - Bargaining has value because it makes us aware of our *powerlessness*.
  - Though there is much in life under our control, there is far more than we realize that is not – this can be disorienting and frightening.
  - In addition to grieving the obvious loss, we are also grieving something deeper – our loss of control and/or our loss of certainty about what we thought we knew.
  
- **Depression**
  - Depression is the emotional centre of grief.
  - Depression can manifest as feelings of emptiness, sadness, and hopelessness etc. as the weight of loss bears down upon you.
  - Crisis – especially involving betrayal (whether real or sensed) – dramatically affects *trust*.
  - You may find that you’re unsure what to trust and what not to trust. A shadow of doubt is cast over everything and everyone – past, present, future. It feels like your previous innocence, optimism, positive outlook, and ability to think the best of people is dramatically affected (if not shattered). This is completely valid and understandable.
  - A person is coming to terms with the *reality* and *finality* of loss.
  - You begin to feel/experience what is true and the negative implications of it.
  
- **Acceptance**
  - This isn’t being “okay” or “happy” with what has happened (that rarely occurs).
  - Rather, it is about *accepting* the reality of the loss – making peace with what *is*.
  - You begin to consider a new, permanent reality (a new normal).
  - Acceptance takes time. Don’t hurry yourself or others; be patient and gracious and prioritize grieving *well*, however long it takes.
  
- **Further Resources**
  - <http://grief.com/> (more on the five stages, FAQs, how to talk to children etc.)