

Understanding and Coping with the Stages of Grief

Objective: To identify ten specific phases of grief and practice strategies for coping.

You Should Know

Understanding and learning about the grieving process is an essential part of your recovery process. It is by no means an easy one. It could actually be one of the most difficult things you have to do in overcoming your trauma. Accepting grieving and going through it as a process will help you make/find closure with the past and move on. It takes real courage and bravery.

Long after Sigmund Freud and his work on sadness and Elizabeth Kübler Ross's approach to the stages of grief, many researchers worked on analyzing the grieving process in order to help people overcome difficult times and start taking risks again, live their lives as fully as possible, recover after loss, and find closure with the past. Grieving is a natural process that helps us to let go, gives us closure, and frees us to move on in our lives.

If we dare to live our life fully, there is no way to avoid loss. Even if we do not live our lives fully, there will be losses. It can be a loss of a person, a relationship, a job, a possession, a feeling, even an idea (if you believed in something deeply). The experience of loss is difficult to go through. Some people try to avoid it, deny it, repress it, and split it off from the rest of their lives. They pay a high price for that. The grieving process has its biological, psychological, and spiritual function and meaning. It helps us withdraw and detach our energy from the lost object, person, or event. It helps us end that attachment and accept our own human fragility, vulnerability, and the tough parts of our lives.

Researchers divided the grieving process into phases to make the process easier to understand and to help therapists and their clients have a common language. Rather than being rigidly divided, phases can blend into one another. Sometimes from phase 1, you can jump to phase 3, then come back to phase 1 and so on. Each individual is different. Knowing the phases can help you understand what is happening, know that it is normal, that it will pass, and that the next phase will come, no matter how illogical or irrational they might seem.

What to Do

It is good to know the normal, typical phases of grief, but it doesn't mean you need to be experiencing or sharing your grieving process all the time. You can make choices, depending on whether you feel strong or vulnerable, about who you are with and who you reveal your feelings to. It is OK to put your feelings aside sometimes. For instance, if you are with emotionally illiterate or toxic people, wait to express your grief. If you are in the middle of a dangerous situation, tell yourself: "I will control myself now. I will grieve later. Safety first." Once you are with safe people, then you can let go.

The Phases of Grief

1. Shock: The trauma happened. You might freeze, become numb or mute, and not register what happened. You might be disorganized and confused; your body might become extremely rigid or extremely limp. You might feel like you don't care. Some people might be in this phase for seconds, some for hours. Follow the advice of the people you trust. If it is a police officer or a doctor who gave you bad news, follow their instructions. Let professional people take care of you.

Remember a trauma and your shock. Describe how you felt.

2. Denial: Once confronted with a trauma, or the news about a trauma, you might not believe it. You might deny it despite all the facts. "No, no, it didn't happen. No, this is not possible, this is not the truth; it didn't happen to me." It is OK to do that. Let yourself say "NO, it didn't happen," for a while.

Remember a trauma. How did you deny it? Describe how you felt.

3. Fight/Flight/Freeze: You might feel the need to fight with the person who gave you the bad news, or with somebody you believe is responsible. Resist the urge. You might run away as far as possible and hide. That is OK. After running, sit down, breathe, and ground yourself. Or you might just faint. That doesn't mean that you are weak. It is your body that is switching you off from the trauma. You need time to absorb what happened.

Remember a trauma and the way you reacted. Describe your initial reactions.

4. Pain Strikes: Sometimes the pain comes unexpectedly; you can't imagine how much pain you would experience. You might feel like every bone in your body is hurting, every part of your personality, and your soul is aching too. Still, our bodies are made to endure it and yours will, too. The pain will stop one day.

Remember the trauma and describe the pain you felt.

5. Emotional Elaboration: You might have a panic attack, burst into tears, get angry, or feel a range of other human emotions. Your self is trying to handle the trauma. Be aware of angry or aggressive feelings or thoughts—they might look logical to you but they are not. This is still normal. For instance, you might think, how can anyone be angry at their wife who died and left them? They can; it is possible and human. Just understand and do your best to control it, and not act on it. Or talk to a therapist or a grief counselor who can understand it and help you accept it. Be aware of guilt, that is, taking everything that happened on your shoulders. Survivor’s guilt is a known human phenomenon. People save lives and feel guilty they didn’t save everybody. People survive and feel guilty the others died. That is normal! Once you are in your safe place, with safe people, let it all go.

Remember a trauma and describe the whole range of your feelings.

6. Rationalizations: This is a phase when you try to explain rationally what happened or make your own theory about the event. This is a normal human need. You might develop several different theories and elaborate each one of them at length. You need friends who are willing to listen all night without confronting you with their own theories. You might change your theories and facts, but what you are really doing is trying to convince others—and yourself—as a way to understand and process the trauma.

Remember a trauma and your theory/theories about it.

7. Acceptance: This phase is when you acknowledge that the trauma was beyond your control. It is sometimes very difficult for us humans to accept our limitations and boundaries, the idea that “things just happen.” You did the best you could. Accept that bad things happen. Stop fighting.

Remember a trauma and how you came to accept it.

8. Risk Taking: If you went through all of the above phases, you will likely come to understand that life is complicated, complex, and sometimes traumatic. But one morning you will wake up and feel that you don’t want to spend the rest of your life as a shell of a person. You want to live again and that means you will have to take risks. But you are wiser now. You will take a risk to live, love, and work again; adopt a new child; find new friends; or move somewhere. Your choice will be wise.

Remember a trauma and the turning point that led to your decision to move on.

9. Separation: For many people, this is the phase when you say goodbye to your traumatic experience. You might write a diary or a letter (that you will never send) saying goodbye to your loss, places, and situations where you suffered; people who hurt you; and your experiences and actions while grieving.

Remember a trauma and describe the way you said goodbye.

10. Gratitude: Then, one day you will feel grateful. Grateful that you are alive, that you have your life, and that you can go on. Yes, you were hurt, yes, you experienced loss. But you had something to lose. You will rediscover the joy in nature, people, and yourself. When that happens, you might want to help people who are going through what you went through—people who are confused, lost, or resigned.

Remember a trauma and describe how you learned to be grateful.

On the lines below, describe the trauma you experienced and your individual grieving style.

Strategies for Understanding and Coping with Grief

- Understand the phases of grieving.
- Learn how to control your behavior.
- Learn how to control your thoughts.
- Learn how to control your feelings.
- The grieving process is a private process; protect it.
- Teach the significant people in your life about the grieving process.
- Create a safety net with people you can trust and who will be understanding.
- Find a therapist or grief counselor.
- Find a grief support group.
- Be patient with yourself. Give yourself time, as much time as necessary.
- Stop punishing yourself; it will not help, nor will being self-destructive.
- Ask for help in any phase and be specific about what you need.
- Take care of yourself.
- Don't make important life decisions while grieving.
- Help others who are grieving.
- Write a grief diary.
- Congratulate yourself when you finish a phase.
- Paint, sing, or dance your process; if you choose, keep it private until you go through all the phases.
- Even when you are focused on grieving, look around at the world sometimes.
- Do some charity work. Give back.
- Think about what you liked doing before the trauma.
- Notice how other people handle trauma. You don't have to do the same, but they might be doing something useful. Give it a try.