

# Stages of Grief

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Crises are usually accompanied by the loss of someone or something important to a student or group of students. Educators need to understand children who are grieving and be prepared to support them during this challenging time.

The psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), developed a set of five stages commonly seen in the grieving process. The same five stages conceivably characterize students trying to come to grips with a loss (e.g., the death of a friend). Although individuals don't necessarily manifest the characteristics of each of these stages or progress from one stage to the next in the following sequence, some students' behaviors might be more understandable seen in this context.

The loss of a parent, relative, or close friend usually comes as a profoundly painful experience for children and adults. Grief, the intense emotion that follows a loss, may be experienced in stages. Realize that these stages serve only as a guide to the behaviors that can emerge and are often dependent on many factors, including the age of the person grieving, the available support system, previous experience with loss, and the individual's ability to understand and communicate emotions.

## Stage 1: Shock/Denial

Denial acts as a buffer. It gives the person time to regroup, take stock, and eventually mobilize other defenses. A person in the denial stage of grief finds it hard to believe or accept the death and may

- think, "This can't be happening."
- seem to have forgotten the death by acting unfeeling or clownlike.
- pretend that the loss has not occurred or that everything is "fine."
- have nightmares and report dreaming of the deceased.

## Stage 2: Anger

Anger allows the full force of emotions to be felt by the person.

It may be directed (e.g., by railing at the person who died), or diffused (e.g., by acting belligerent with anyone). A person experiencing the anger stage of grief may

- think, "I hate her for doing that," or "I hate him for dying!"
- direct anger outward by blaming others or turn the anger inward blame him/herself.
- provoke fights and display a hostile attitude.
- display antisocial behavior, including destruction of property.
- break rules and refuse to comply with a parent or teacher's wishes.

### **Stage 3: Bargaining/Guilt**

Bargaining is an attempt to postpone something that will inevitably happen or even to negate something that has already happened. A person displaying symptoms of the bargaining/guilt stage of grief may:

- think, "If I become a better person, maybe he'll get better."
- bargain with him/herself ("If I promise not to get into anymore trouble at school, maybe she'll come back.") or bargain with God ("God, please make this go away. I promise to do anything you ask of me if you can bring my Daddy back").
- display an apologetic attitude.
- engage in self-destructive behavior.
- develop somatic physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches.

### **Stage 4: Depression**

Depression is the preparation for acceptance. It is the initial realization of what will happen or already has happened, and it brings with it the full sadness of reality. A person exhibiting signs of the depression stage of grieving may

- think, "What's the use of even trying anymore?"
- exhibit sleep disturbance, including sleeping excessively, that may be nonrestorative, and/or have an inability to sleep.
- worry about the health of family members and self.
- cry frequently and have a general disinterest in activities.
- cling and whine.
- experiment with alcohol and other drugs.
- experience a drop in grades because of difficulty concentrating.

### **Stage 5: Acceptance**

Acceptance is the beginning of the end of the struggle with a death or other loss.

It is a demarcation point for reconciling with the past and progressing into the future. A person showing signs of the acceptance stage of grief may

- think, "What's done is done. I have to get on with my life now."
- show increased energy, renewed hope for the future, goal setting, and a return to previous levels of functioning.

This process of grieving may vary between individuals in time, length, and degree. Some individuals may not express every stage or may fluctuate between stages. Most people need

help and support to work through the stages of grief. Anniversaries and holidays that serve as a reminder of the death may be difficult each year.

Children respond to grief in their own unique way. When someone they love dies, it is important to allow children to freely express their sorrow. They should be reassured repeatedly that they will be taken care of and not abandoned. Children also need to see the adults around them grieve and express emotions genuinely. Anger, denial, guilt, and fear are all normal parts of grief. Children need to work through these feelings. There is great value in adults showing appropriate self- disclosure.

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Adapted from Judie Smith, *School Crisis Manual, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* and Paramjit T. Joshi, Shulamit M. Lewin, and Deborah A. O'Donnell, *The Handbook of Frequently Asked Questions Following Traumatic Events: Violence, Disasters, or Terrorism*.