

On Loss and Grief

In 1969 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published a book that has been very helpful for many people in understanding the common stages we may pass through when faced with losses, and in particular our imminent death or the death of a loved one. They are in short: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

These have been validated and expanded somewhat over the years, but criticism has also been raised that these stages are not linear, not everyone experiences them all, those with good support systems may experience them minimally or not at all, and people in grief should not be pushed towards acceptance. Kubler-Ross later acknowledged and validated these concerns herself.

Yet the stages continue to resonate with many people decades later, so can prove a very useful tool in handling not just death but any loss or difficulty. We may even feel some of these ourselves in sympathy with loved ones going through loss and grief. The greater the loss and weaker the support, the greater the difficulty we may experience.

The first stage she delineated was shock and denial as we react with confusion, numbness, and disbelief. We may think to ourselves: "Oh my God no! This is a mistake, it cannot be happening!" This can provide emotional protection from being overwhelmed by the disorienting intensity and reality of losses. We might experience outbursts of emotion, crying, loss of sleep and appetite, and in extreme cases nausea, difficulty breathing, swallowing, and vomiting.

Another stage is anger as the shock wears off and we realize the denial can't continue and enter the protest phase. Irritability, frustration, and pain often lead to criticisms, blame, and rage. We may focus our anger on God, others, or ourselves. Lashing out can cause irreparable damage to relationships so we are wise to avoid extreme reactions. Like a trapped or cornered animal we want to fight our way out of fear and pain back to safety and normalcy. Our thought here may be "This is so unfair, who is to blame, and why is this happening to me?!"

In the bargaining phase we often try to negotiate for an extended life or return of past relationships, situations, and things in an attempt to avoid the loss and grief through a compromise or lifestyle change. Here we may dwell on what might have been done to prevent the loss or avoid it and think "I will do anything to fix this!" Realizing there may be no way to restore what was lost can lead to the next stage of depression and despair.

In the depression stage sadness can feel exhausting, disorienting, and overwhelming as we come to see the full magnitude of the loss. We may experience apathy, nostalgia, and guilt, as well as withdrawal, restlessness, loneliness, and lastly hopelessness, emptiness, and despair. Here we may think "Why go on, is life still worth living?" The list of possible difficult feelings and experiences here is lengthy and may be extremely challenging to navigate, yet we must feel it to heal it. This is considered the disorganization phase.

Reaching acceptance we learn to face, accept, and deal with the reality of our situation and begin to gain emotional stability. We come to see the inevitability of our situation and mortality. The losses or tragic events are re-imagined in the context of the bigger picture and we begin to move on to problem solving, reattachments and hope. We now create more realistic expectations and make informed choices. We are able to integrate our

emotions and at last let healing take place. We find meaning even in death and loss. This is the reorganization phase.

Kubler-Ross ended here but others consider another stage of reconstruction and proactive functioning. Life takes on new meaning as we once again find our passion and purpose in the light of growth through these challenges. We are once again able to move forward despite the lingering pain and suffering. The area of life affected may never be same, never as quite as carefree and happy, but we find room to feel joy and freedom. We make plans for a brighter future and anticipate good things coming our way.

Our functioning comes back as we find realistic solutions to problems of the past, present, and future. Depression lifts and anger and frustration fade as we adjust to life on new terms despite our losses. Faith, serenity, and happiness follow as emotions calm and we are better able to share with others and find connection. We become empowered again as our self esteem returns and becomes stronger and more resilient to life's travails.

Many years on we now understand each of us experiences these stages differently. Some experience them in a different order, others flash back and forth between them feeling some deeply and others minimally if at all. The fact that some people have little, if any grief and its manifestations due to losses because of good support informs us how important it is to find wise, caring, and engaged communities.

The concern of having to work through all of our issues before we find peace dissolves in the realization that we may find acceptance in each and every stage when we surrender to it and let it work its magic and miracle. Where we are is where we need to be as the perfect path is right before us. Just as a ship may be tossed upon the waves or a great tree by the wind in storms, the ships anchor and the trees roots hold fast.

We take care not to become mired in a bad place or try to rush off to a happy place. Instead we keep an eye on the big picture and take solace in the fact that we can be active on multiple levels at one time and none of them are personal, pervasive (our whole life), or permanent. The clouds of depression and denial will come and go, the storms of anger and frustration as well. The light and life of new days and new ways of living will also shine and fade just as day follows night, and night follows day.

If we insist on ignoring our difficulties we are doomed to repeat them. Yet if we can muster the resolve to focus and concentrate on our losses, pain, and suffering, we will find insight, understanding, and wisdom enough to loosen their grip on us and find peace, freedom, and happiness. In our culture of denial, comfort seeking, and quick fixes this is revolutionary, so often very hard to do. But you are worth, more than worth it. Your family and friends, just as they are, are more than worth it.

Considering the dire challenges confronting humanity and our world, we may well be doomed until and unless we have a climate change, the climate of fear and denial that threatens us all. This is our internal climate, and so a choice each one of us must make. To save the world we may need to change everything, and to change everything takes everyone. We have got to come together to recognize our losses, grieve them fully and effectively and move on to a new life and new day. Despite our losses and our grief, there is hope, help, healing and happiness.

