

Stages of Death and Dying Adapted for Those Experiencing Grief

Important Considerations: Stages are not fixed for a period of time. Each stage is a response to our feelings, in the moment, which may last minutes or hours as we move in and out of them. We feel one stage, move into another and then back to the first one. As humans we are capable of feeling many different emotions, all at once.

Framing of the stages: Each stage serves a **function** in the process of grieving. The function may serve to preserve us physically or emotionally or provide structure in the moment. Certain **characteristics** or internalized and externalized behaviors are evident in each stage. Knowing these characteristics can help us to identify which stage we may be experiencing, thus heightening self-awareness.

It is also important to acknowledge that we move in and out of stages, which can happen quickly or rather slowly. The **transition** out of each stage is not an ending of that stage, but rather a temporary departure as we become more connected with our underlying emotions and begin to accept our loss.

Denial:

-Function: Helps us to survive the loss. Helps us pace feelings of grief while we are in shock. This can be considered “nature’s way” of letting in only as much as we can handle. Denial serves as a protective factor.

-Characteristics: The world may seem meaningless and overwhelming. It may be difficult to make sense of life. We may ask ourselves, “how can I possibly go on?” or “why should I go on?” During denial we’re working hard to get through each day.

-Transition: As denial fades, our underlying feelings begin to surface.

Anger:

-Function: Anger is the emotion we are most used to managing. It frequently presents itself when we are faced with adversity in life. Some of us have learned to show anger as a way to protect ourselves from vulnerability. Anger also gives us purpose in grieving.

-Characteristics: We can direct anger at a doctor, family member, friend, someone who isn’t around in our time of need. This can provide structure and purpose when we feel a loss of control. Channeling anger at someone somehow feels better than nothing.

-Transition: Working through our anger and acknowledging it can help us to move past it and access our underlying emotions.



Bargaining:

-Function: Bargaining returns us to the past. We begin to question our actions and thoughts before our loss. We feel the natural desire to have our life returned to what it was: we want our loved one restored. We want to go back in time.

-Characteristics: We ask ourselves, “what if,” and “if only.” What if I caught the illness earlier? If only I spent more time with my father. Guilt accompanies bargaining. We begin to find fault in ourselves and what we “think” we can do differently. We remain in the past trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt and pain of our loss.

-Transition: Focus on the past can bring about feelings of depression as we explore things we can not change and have no physical control over.

Depression:

-Function: The feeling of emptiness emerges as we move into the present. Grief begins to consume our life on a deeper level. Depression is a natural response to a great loss. It is not a sign of mental illness or something to be fixed. Depression is one of the steps in healing from your loss.

-Characteristics: We may feel a sense of intense sadness and struggle with thoughts of how we may go on without our loved one. We’ve realized that our loved one did not heal and has left us.

-Transition: Sitting with the intense sadness of the loss of our loved one helps to move us into acceptance.

Acceptance:

-Function: This doesn’t mean that everything is right or is ok. We’ve gotten to the point in which we have accepted the reality that our loved one is physically gone and have acknowledge this as our new reality. We are learning to live with loss, experience our feelings and care for ourselves.

-Characteristics: We may first resist living in a world absent of our loved one. We may try to maintain life as it was before our loved one passed (keeping clothing, maintaining routines we shared). We may find that we simply have more good days than tough ones. We reorganize roles, take on new ones, or reassign them to others (handyman). Beginning to live and experience our lives with contentment or happiness may feel like a betrayal to our loved one. Replacing what is lost will never be possible, but we begin to make new connections and acknowledge our feelings which helps us to grow.