

Comfort and Peace

By Dot Franks, MA

Summer seems to start with Memorial Day, that's the day pools are opened, which invites parties and celebration. That is also the day set aside to honor those who have died in service to our country. It is a time for remembering those loved ones who are no longer with us, as well; and this can make it difficult to feel like celebrating.

If you have recently suffered the loss of a loved one, you have gone through one of the most difficult experiences of life. No doubt you are tired. You may also be having so many different emotions that you are not sure how you feel. Sadness, fear, guilt, relief, confusion, bewilderment, anger are but a few of the possibilities. Or you may simply be numb.

Whatever you are feeling now is right for you. There may be people in your life who tell you that you should or should not be feeling a certain way. These people mean well, but they do not know how you should feel. Only you know.

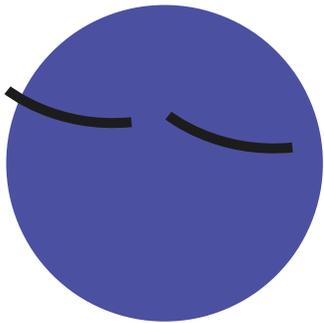
People who are willing to simply stand beside you as you experience grief will probably be the most helpful. They will not judge or criticize you, nor will they tell you how you should feel. What they might be willing to do is tell you how it was for them when loss occurred and what they found helpful.

What we know is that if you are reading this, your heart may be broken. We would like to tell you, "It just takes time..." or that you can replace what you have lost, but this is not true. Some people find that as time goes by, they are more able to face the day and function in the world. This is good. The truth for most of us is that when we lose someone important to us we are changed. This does not mean that we cannot find happiness in life and enjoy ourselves again. It means that our loss is incorporated into ourselves, and we are different afterwards. Many people find ways to grow through their grief.

None of this matters when grief is new. All we know is the pain we feel. The purpose of this article is to share some of the information others have learned through their own grief or by walking with others through their grief.



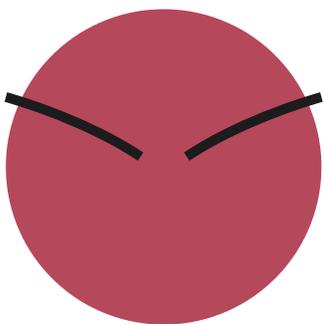
Some of the earliest observations about grieving were made by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., as she gave care to the dying and their families. Dr. Kubler-Ross saw grief in five stages: Denial (shock), anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although everyone's grief is different, there are some feelings and behaviors that help us identify with each other, and giving meaning to these things we have in common sometimes helps. The following is an abbreviated list of Dr. Kubler-Ross' stages:



Stage One: Denial.

It is easier to understand this stage if you think of it as shock. In this stage, we continue to function in the face of life-changing events. We are able to attend to practical matters and take care of others if need be. We are protected by shock for as long as we need to be.

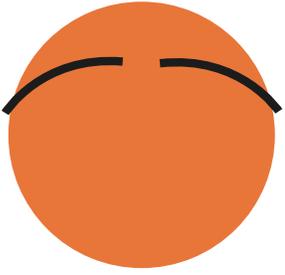
DENIAL



Stage Two: Anger.

We are able to feel the resentments we hold against others. We may be angry with the person who died for things they did or did not do, we may feel anger toward the disease that took their life or the doctors who treated them, we may feel anger that they left us; and anything can set us off. We may feel anger toward God. It is good to identify this anger and talk it over with someone we trust because we may take our anger out on others if we don't understand where it is coming from.

ANGER

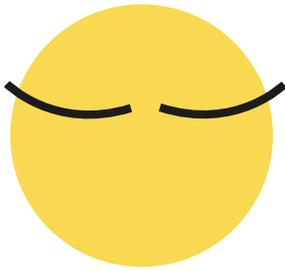


BARGAINING

Stage Three: Bargaining.

We make deals with ourselves to try to stop our emotional pain. Some of these bargains would sound like, "...if I can just stay busy enough, I won't have to feel this sadness..." Or, "Shopping (overeating, drinking, taking pills, or any other compulsive behavior) will take away my fear..." Compulsive behavior might actually work for the short term; eventually, though we are simply left with the truth of our feelings. What actually helps is to acknowledge the significance of our

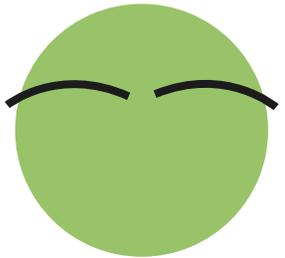
loss – what we have actually lost – and the way we truly feel about it; then talk about this with someone we trust. When grief is shared, healing can begin.



DEPRESSION

Stage Four: Depression.

We see we can't replace the loss, and the feelings of sadness are a part of us. We admit helplessness and inability to control the past or change others; so depression may require a certain kind of talking – to your doctor, a counselor, or a minister, rabbi, or priest. The way out of depression is through it, and sometimes we need a special kind of help for this.



ACCEPTANCE

Stage Five: Acceptance.

Once we have worked through our depression, we are more able to see things clearly. Our concentration and memory are a little better and our emotions no longer seem so overwhelming. Acceptance does not mean the absence of pain; it is acknowledgment of truth and the dawning of realization that we can actually continue to live our own lives. We can expect to be able to cope with sad

memories; and we can also remember and cherish the good things we recall. We know our grief is healing when thoughts of our loved one bring more good feelings than sadness.

Even though this list is in a certain order, Dr. Kubler-Ross would tell you that we do not go through these stages at any predictable rate; and even after having experienced one stage, we might return to it again and again. It might be possible to feel all five stages in one day. Her list is simply a way of understanding our feelings and reactions.

Until we arrive at a place of comfort and peace, we can help ourselves by following a few guidelines: Eat three good meals a day, get adequate rest, and find some type of recreation we can enjoy. Mostly, it helps to remember that we need each other.