

Grief & Loss

What's Normal?

Caregivers – especially those working with the elderly – should expect to occasionally feel the loss of a Resident. In 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified the five stages of normal, healthy grief:

1. **Denial.** During this stage, the loss doesn't feel real. You might think, "I can't believe she's really gone."
2. **Anger.** When denial fails – as it inevitably does – mourners tend to focus on the injustice of the loss. For example, "She'd still be here if it weren't for COVID!"
3. **Bargaining.** In this stage, you might attempt to negotiate with God. For example, "If you protect the people I care about, I promise I'll change my ways." The purpose of this stage is to create a sense of power to prevent future losses.
4. **Depression.** Eventually, the full reality of the loss becomes clear and sadness sets in. You might find yourself hopeless, lethargic, and tearful.
5. **Acceptance.** During this final stage, you'll come to terms with the reality of your loss. You'll engage in self-soothing, reflection on the meaning of your life, and fond reminiscing about the departed.

It's important to understand that these are the common stages of grief, but not everyone goes through them in exactly the same way. Some people complete all the stages, but in a different order. Some people skip stages.

It's important to remember that there's no right or wrong way to grieve, but some processes cause less pain than others.

Overcoming Unhealthy Grief

Unhealthy grief is a process that causes you more pain than necessary. You should consider seeking help with your grief if you experience any of the following:

- **Self-blame.** If you find yourself feeling responsible for the death, you need to give yourself a reality-check. Self-blame is a painful way to convince yourself you have the power to prevent death if you just avoid mistakes in the future. It's a distortion of reality.
- **Feeling Disloyal.** Mourners might be reluctant to let go of grief for fear of betraying the deceased. They might feel they have to prove their love by suffering longer or more intensely than necessary. If you find yourself feeling that way, consider what your departed loved-one would want for you.
- **Prolonged Depression.** Everyone's different, but most people reach the Acceptance stage of grief in about a year. If you feel "stuck" and unable to reach Acceptance, you should consider professional help.
- **Using Drugs or Alcohol to Cope.** By numbing yourself with substances, you can't face your feelings and navigate through the grief process in a healthy way.
- **Grief Avoidance.** It's tempting to just not think about your loss, but that's unhealthy. Grief will eventually catch up to you. It will come out in harmful ways – like irritability and insomnia – until you allow yourself to go through the stages. If you try to avoid your grief, you're just prolonging the pain.
- **Lashing Out.** Anger is normal while grieving, but punishing others is unhealthy. Although anger might be easier to handle than sadness, it interferes with your ability to resolve your grief.

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