

BEREAVEMENT AND GRIEF

There are five stages that are commonly experienced as one passes through the heart-wrenching process of grief. These stages are shock/disbelief, denial, anger, depression and acceptance. These stages do not necessarily occur in this order, and it may be that some individuals will not experience all the stages. In fact, the passage through the grief process is unique to each individual and is determined, in the main, by the makeup of the person experiencing the loss. For example, someone who has never really expressed their feelings openly may pass through each stage and be seemingly unaffected, even appear cold and clinical; equally it is possible that the same person could erupt uncontrollably, as all their past pent-up emotion attaches itself to their grief and bursts through with an overwhelming intensity.

It is important to note that it is quite common for those who are grieving to become entangled and stuck in one of the stages or keep moving back and forth between the different stages, being torn apart by two or more opposing emotions. The time spent being pulled apart or stuck in one of the stages can vary, from minutes, to hours, weeks, months and even years, dependent on the person's understanding of their grief, the intensity of their emotional experience, and the kind of support that they have available to them.

Bereavement/grief is something that we all have to face at some point and how we experience that challenge is shaped by our understanding, beliefs and perceptions. Healthy grief is a passage that will probably involve every conceivable emotion and is not usually experienced in the neat orderly fashion that the five stages would suggest. However, amidst the chaos of our different emotions, each competing for expression, there is still an overriding pattern and structure shaping the nature of grief. Bereavement usually does begin with shock and disbelief, leaving us feeling either numb and unable to feel, or paradoxically exposing us to so much pain that we feel as if we will burst. This state of shock is often followed by a denial of what is happening. Denial is that place where we retreat into our imagination and fantasy, and like a child, wish it were all different - denial is where we try to construct a reality less painful than the one facing us.

Once the realisation dawns on us that our loss is real and cannot be re-written, we may fall into a pit of absolute despair, which if not addressed could become mild or even chronic depression. Or, we might go the other way and become inflamed, consumed by anger and want to lash out at those around us, or the person who has gone, maybe God, or even ourselves, as we desperately seek to release our pain. In fact, anger is often the pre-cursor for depression, leaving the person exhausted and flat as a consequence of their rage. Equally, one who has been trapped in depression can tire of that state and anger can be conceived out of their fatigue. If we are fortunate enough to have the space, freedom, support and ability to express how we feel, and can move through each of our own stages not becoming stuck in the melting pot of emotions, we are then able to arrive at the place of peace, called acceptance. Acceptance is a place where we are able to re-define ourselves and our lives in the light of our loss and move on, carrying the gifts of our bereavement with us.

This handout is a brief synopsis of a process that has incredible similarity for all of us, whilst still producing enormous variations in our experience; it does not seek to take on all aspects of bereavement, but it does, however, illustrate that there is some order amidst the chaos of grief. If we understand this and allow ourselves to feel and express our emotions in a healthy, preferably supported manner, we will rise up out of the ashes of our pain and loss able to fly again.