

Senior Minutes

In Search of Excellence for Clinical and Management Issues

Grief, Mourning, and Bereavement

People have different opinions about what grief, mourning, and bereavement are. For the purpose of this article the three terms will be defined as:

- **Grief** is the normal **internal** wretched feelings (that knot in the heart) when one reacts to a deep, personal loss.
- **Mourning** is the **outward** expression one goes through to adapt to the grief.
- **Bereavement** is the **period of time** during which one mourns.

Grief

“Grief of the Dying Person”

The Swiss doctor Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote the book on the emotional stages a dying person goes through. (*On Death and Dying*, Macmillan, NY, 1969) In the book she presents what has become known as the Grief Cycle. When a person is told that he/she is terminally ill, the cycle is:



Denial – attempting to avoid the inevitable. “This isn’t happening to me!” “The doctor must be wrong!”

Anger – expressing frustrating, bottled-up emotions. “Why is this happening to me?” Blaming others, especially God. “How can God do this to me!?”

Bargaining – looking for a way out. “I promise I’ll be a better person...if only...” “I’ll never smoke again.” “Make this not happen, and in return I will _____.”

Depression – realizing the inevitable. “I really don’t care anymore.” “I’m too sad to do anything.”

Acceptance – this may not be an “everything is a-ok” stage. It might be more of a “I give up. I don’t want to fight anymore. I’m ready for whatever happens” stage. A person of faith might express it this way: “I’m ready to go home,” or “I’m ready to be with the Lord.”

In the years since 1969 therapists have observed that the grief cycle doesn’t just occur in the lives of the terminally ill. **It can happen to anyone who suffers any kind of loss.**

Therefore the family members of terminally ill people, and especially the Caregiver, can also expect to experience the Grief Cycle.



“Grief of the Caregiver”

Denial – You might find yourself saying things like, “This makes no sense!” or “This isn’t really happening!” You feel powerless.

Anger – You might feel deserted or abandoned, angry because your siblings don’t give you as much help as you need, or because you’ve already sacrificed the things that you wanted to do to take care of your aging parent. These feelings are normal. You are not alone.

Bargaining - You might find yourself asking God, “If I get my act together, will you let Dad live?”

Depression – You might feel sad or angry, but primarily numb. You’re dealing with the realization that the end is near, and there is nothing you can do about it. You feel helpless, hopeless. You fear that this will never end.

Acceptance – You might still feel sad or angry, but the emotions aren’t as strong and raw as they once were. If the death has occurred, you might feel comforted that your parent is no longer suffering, or relieved that you have regained a certain sense of freedom in your life.



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Grief, Mourning, and Bereavement (Cont.)

The grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried – and there is no "normal" timetable for grieving. Some people start to feel better in a few weeks. For others it may take months. However, if after a period of six months your grief has turned into extreme anxiety and depression, seek professional counseling.

Mourning

What an individual does to cope with the loss of a loved one will vary. It will be affected by your (1) personality, (2) upbringing, (3) memories, (4) culture, (5) family, (6) talents, (7) personal spiritual/religious customs, and above all, (8) relationship with the deceased.

Lean on your family and friends, support groups, your pastor, the nursing home social worker, psychologists, and other counselors who can help and support you.



Bereavement

Again, bereavement is that "**period of time**" when you mourn the loss of a loved one to help you deal with the genuine grief you feel. The grieving process has been described as a matter of gradual stages. But it really isn't. A grieving person can regress to a former stage or jump forward to a new stage at any moment. You can be in more than one stage at a time, or there may be stages you never go through.



Grief is a rollercoaster, not a series of stages. Ups, downs. Highs, lows. There's no deadline to get through your grieving. The last drop of a rollercoaster usually is the scariest. You might experience intense grief years after a death, at a family wedding or when a grandchild is born.

There really is no script to follow in your grief and no two people are exactly alike. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross never intended for her "stages" to be a pattern that every grieving person will experience in the same way. In her last book written together with David Kessler (*On Grief and Grieving*, Scribner, NY, 2005) she said this about the five stages of grief: "they were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages...there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is as individual as our lives."

Take as long as you need to *grieve*. There is no deadline. But be alert to the fact that your **grief may lead to an emotional disorder for which you should seek professional help.**

Mourn to deal with your grief.

And realize that the period of time called "*bereavement*" may never end for you. However, as time passes your bereavement will involve less sadness and more satisfaction, fewer emotions that are heartbreaking and more memories that are heartwarming.

This article is one of a series included in a "Resource Manual for Bereavement in Long-Term Care" created, published, and copyrighted by *Senior PsychCare*. To receive the complete manual, call 713-850-0049, ext. 232.