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## Stages Of Bereavement

For those who have suffered the loss of a loved one through separation, divorce and / or death.....

As to the number of stages of bereavement, opinions vary greatly. It even goes by different names. We call it – stages of, a process, steps, cycle, circle, time or timeline of grief.

There are several models: the three phases of grief, four stages, the five steps outlined by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross which was actually written for people who were facing their own death, as well as one listing seven cycles.

Finally there is the ten stage timeline as listed in the book Good Grief by Granger Westberg:

### Shock – 1st Stage

Among the bereavement stages I studied there was a general consensus that shock is the 1st stage a grieving person goes through.

Some people spend only a few minutes in this initial phase while others can spend many weeks feeling numb.

At this time others may experience disbelief or denial; “This can’t be happening!”

Often this is the stage a person is in at the time of the funeral. Probably you have heard people say; “I can’t believe how well he/she is handling this!”. Usually this is the stage where one feels numb. The death doesn’t feel real yet.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking the person doesn’t care, or is coping so well that they don’t need you. That is absolutely untrue! Soon all of their emotion will come crashing in and that is when they will need your support.

### Emotion - 2nd Stage

Many consider emotional release the 2nd phase of bereavement. The shock that comes with the death of a loved one begins to wear off and raw feelings emerge. This is probably the most recognized step in the grief process. A person can feel acute anguish and other emotions such as anger, fear, or guilt, all at once or in no particular order. Sometimes we wonder if we are going crazy. But remember....these are natural reactions, even if they are scary.

It is okay to cry, even good. It can help relieve pent up stress. We don’t need to feel uncomfortable with this natural event. Even Jesus wept.

It is part of the grieving process that most men and women need to go through. Some people who don’t allow themselves to cry, get stuck in this cycle of

bereavement and thus slow their own grief journey.

Again there is no set time frame in the grief process, don't get hung up on how fast or slow you go through this.

My own grief journey didn't seem to fit neatly into these patterns because I grieved for the loss of the man I married to mental illness before his death ever occurred. So I guess you could say that I went through the process two times. I lost him twice – 1st to mental illness – 2nd to death.

So don't compare yourself to anyone else. No one has experienced exactly what you are going through. But at one time or another in our lives we will all experience sorrow.

Granger Westberg says it well in his book Good Grief; "Suffering is not good, but you need not be devastated by it. Ultimately we can be healed of our bitterness and move ahead."

### Depressed / Lonely - Stage 3

We are likely to feel depressed once the numbness has worn off and we are through the first crush of raw emotion. We are rung out from everything we have gone through.

We feel lonely and full of sorrow. Don't panic, this is normal –we would like to avoid feeling this way, it goes against our culture, that says we should feel happy all the time.

We must allow ourselves this time of mourning. If we try to hurry through the grief cycle ultimately we will only slow down the bereavement process.

But during this time we will have to make ourselves go through the motions of daily living. We must try to eat healthy, and get some moderate exercise. Avoid misusing drugs or alcohol because it might only deepen your sadness.

I remember a phrase I picked up somewhere along the line that works for this stage....

You can't go over it,

You can't go under it,

You can't go around it,

You have to go through it.

This saying helped me to realize I must hold on, cling to my faith, and trust – not feel – that "this too shall pass".

### Physical Symptoms – Stage 4

There is no getting around it. Bereavement will exhibit itself through physical symptoms in the body.

Following is a list of physical symptoms that you might experience:

- Sleeplessness and insomnia
- Wanting to sleep too much
- Feel physically drained
- Tightness of muscles
- Being lethargic with no energy
- Fidgety and unable to sit still
- Lose interest in work; house; physical appearance
- Neglect personal hygiene (don't brush teeth, take regular baths, or wash hair very often)
- Stay extremely busy so as not to have time to think
- Lack of interest in sex
- Sigh a lot
- Drink too much
- Take too many drugs
- No appetite
- Too much appetite
- Digestive problems – “touchy stomach”
- Susceptible to illnesses
- Stress headaches
- Out of emotional control - feel good one minute; in the pits the next
- "Zombie Effect" Feelings shut down due to your body's natural coping mechanism
- Brain is scrambled; can't think clearly or remember things
- Cry continuously
- Can't cry -- bottle it up (it will come out years later)
- Talk about it over and over and dwell on it every moment
- Fantasize about the past
- Suffer from extreme loneliness
- Have lots of guilt about things you did or didn't do
- Engage in self-criticism
- Have a huge hole in your heart and soul
- Think you will never recover from your loss
- Suffer from severe depression
- See no reason to exist

We may not experience all of these things, but certainly all of us will experience some of them!

Our emotional grief can make us physically sick. This is very common.

If possible avoid the physical extremes of eating, exercising, or sleeping too much or too little.

There are things you can do to encourage Healthy Bereavement and ways to avoid

Unhealthy Grief.

Balance is key. I once had a Bible study teacher who would say;

---"You can fall off the bridge on either side."---

Since I am such a picture person this phrase was very helpful to me in all aspects of life.

### Panicky about our Preoccupation – Stage 5

Preoccupation with a deceased loved one is very normal for the bereaved. That person was very much a part of our daily lives.

It would be unusual if you didn't think of your loved one as you sat down to dinner without them or climbed into an empty bed. Expect that you will have difficulty concentrating and that you feel in a fog.

I actually went through this stage of grief before my husband died. Because of his mental illness, he became a homeless drifter. My young daughter and I experienced the loss of his presence before we lost him to death. Therefore we processed through this grief stage before he actually died.

I like what Granger Westberg said in his chapter on this subject in his helpful little book, Good Grief- "We must not however wallow in our gloom, for it will only prolong our grief work. And to work through grief is very hard work."

We must not minimize the fact that this is tough stuff.

### Guilt – Stage 6

There is "normal" guilt, then there is "unhealthy" self-blaming. The two are very different.

It is "normal" to feel remorse over something you neglected to do for your loved one when they were alive. Or wishing you could take back some careless word you said.

There is not a single person who isn't in this same boat. Unfortunately we are imperfect human beings. We must admit and confess this and then just as God forgives us we must forgive ourselves.

"Unhealthy" self-blame is when you start beating yourself up out of proportion to what happened. An example might be if you had stayed at the dying person's bedside for days and the doctor insists you go home to get rest. In that time your loved one dies. If you blame yourself excessively for not being there and do so for a long drawn out time, it becomes unhealthy.

If you can't work through this stage on your own, this might be the time to seek help. There are numerous resources we can utilize. Obviously we should talk to friends and family, however there are times we need someone with more training. Talk to your pastor or the hospital chaplain. Your doctor, or perhaps the funeral director could refer you to grief or bereavement counselors in your area.

We also might need to talk with a counselor if we are struggling through complicated remorse or grief. When we are estranged from the person at the time of death we may need extra help to sort through all of the guilt and emotions we are experiencing.

Needing someone to help us work through everything is not a sign of weakness, but wisdom!

My dad, a pastor, - who recently died of Alzheimer's (another grief story) - always showed us by example that for any part of life, to resource when we did not have enough experience to work through something on our own.

He was a humble man with great wisdom who wasn't afraid to ask for help.

### Anger / Resentment – Stage 7

People don't like to talk about anger and resentment in the same sentence with bereavement. We have this misguided notion that we are supposed to be serene and accepting. But grieving doesn't work that way. It is a messy process, not a tidy package.

When someone we love is wrenched away from us through death, it is only natural for us to feel fury. It is a very human response that we shouldn't be afraid of. Our rage or resentment can be directed any number of directions.

Towards:

- Doctors
- Nurses
- Caregivers
- Family members
- The person who caused the accident
- Even at God

We can take our outrage to God, He is big enough to shoulder it. We can pour out our feelings to Him.

Over time we will wrestle with and process through this stage. It may feel like it will never end, but it does.

Don't try to walk through the grief process alone. Lean on friends, family, clergy, or counselors for help.

### Resist Returning – Stage 8

We resist returning to daily life.

"We also find, when we attempt to get back into life again, it is much too painful." - Granger Westberg – Good Grief

I found this to be true. In this stage we may be finding some moments of light in our dark days, yet ..... life at full throttle is just still too hard. Nobody seems to notice

that you are still raw and bleeding. We might want to "put our toe in" but not yet "go off the high dive". You are still mourning.

"But we somehow have the impression that grief is out of place in our society." - Granger Westberg - "Good Grief"

This is where our friends and family can help. They can include us without pushing us for more than we are ready for. One of the greatest gifts they can give us is an openness to remember the deceased, telling fun stories and fond remembrances. Gradually we can reenter "the land of the living". We must be gentle on ourselves by not expecting too much too soon, yet at the same time we cannot let ourselves shut everything out completely.

We can follow the adage of my Bible study teacher "You can fall off the bridge on either side."

### Hope - Stage 9

In this stage we begin to hope again.

We are created in such a way that eventually, if the natural course of things progress, our wounds begin to heal.

We don't need to feel guilty for finding pleasure again. It may be something as simple as the sun on our face and we notice it for the first time in months.

Regaining some measure of joy in our lives doesn't mean our deceased loved one means less to us. No far from it!

We can begin to remember special moments with less pain. We may still go through waves of grief, however the sunshine in our days may increase and the cloudy times decrease.

It seems as if life is beginning in us once again. We will never forget the one who has died, but finally we feel as though we can and will survive even though they are no longer with us.

Healing is happening and we begin to accept this new way of living. We come to terms with things and begin to have peace.

### Struggle to Affirm Reality - Stage 10

"We finally begin to affirm reality. Please note that we do not say that the final stage is, 'We become our old selves again.' When we go through any significant grief experience we come out of it as different people." - Granger Westberg - from his book Good Grief.

This is so true. We will never be exactly the same again. But at this stage we begin to accept that we do indeed have a future ahead of us. Though we will never be exactly the same again.

A Lightning Scarred Tree in a Forest ...

There is a scar. Death has changed us.

We can choose whether we will let this death experience makes us "bitter or better". So much of that depends on how we approach this grief journey of ours. We must face this difficult task and do the grief work. If we are to heal we cannot avoid the pain, but must accept it and work through it.

Remember the bereavement process does not follow an exact timeline or pattern. No one can tell you whether you are grieving "too fast" or "too slow". Let it come, do not try to force yourself to slow down or speed up. At this time we must allow ourselves to just be.

Expect the "first's" that you encounter can and will be hard.

There are the good firsts like birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries that you shared. There are the negative firsts like "year" anniversaries, learning of the disease, entering the hospital, or the day they died.

We are reaching a phase of resolution. We will still have times of pain and bereavement, we will still cry, but we can begin to start to "grow" forward, to make a new life, forever changed, but one well worth living! There need not be guilt when this begins to happen. It is a natural and healthy process.

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The name given to the process we all go through does not really matter. Nor do we have to agree on the number of stages we go through.

However understanding what some of these steps are does help us. It helps us to realize what we are feeling and experiencing is "normal", if one can call it that.

It is very important to remember that these are general standards of what to expect. Not a hard, fast, set of steps everyone processes through at the same rate. Nor does everyone go through every stage.

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**It's important to know that the stages can come in any order, and can be revisited multiple times, often without warning.**