

## Five Stages of Grief:

1. **Denial** – The first stage of grief is Denial. It is really the first of our reactions to any form of sudden loss. It is very common for people to try and initially deny the loss of health in order to subconsciously avoid sadness, and the thought of pending mental struggles. People in denial often withdraw from their normal social behavior and become isolated. Denial has no set time frame or may never be felt at all. However, it is considered the first stage of grief.
2. **Anger** – The second stage of grief is Anger. People that are grieving often become upset with their body for failing to keep them healthy. One's perception of self is filled with anxiety and the fear of uncertainty. The path of least resistance is anger as the loss of health is something no one ever wants to accept. Other times people become angry at themselves if they feel they could have done something more to stop the loss from happening.
3. **Bargaining** – The third stage of grief is Bargaining. Bargaining involves the use of conditional logic to question how life might be different if I had only done this or that. It is actually very normal, and largely considered to be a sign that they are beginning to comprehend their situation. People will often try to make a deal, or promise to do anything, if the pain will be taken away.
4. **Depression** – The fourth stage of grief is Depression. Contrary to popular belief, depression is something that may take some time to develop. We often think we are depressed when a grief event first occurs, but there is usually a lot of shock and other emotions present before any real depression can set in. This situational depression can be resolved by working to accept our illness or it can progress into chronic depression.
5. **Acceptance** – The fifth stage of grief is Acceptance. This is the point where the person experiencing grief no longer is looking backward to try and is now working to accept and restore their health. It is not to say that they no longer feel the vast array of emotions brought on by their grief, but they are ready to embrace the idea that they are reaching a new point in their lives. At this point, they are beginning to understand that there is a new beginning on the horizon.

Acceptance should not be confused with healing or recovering from the loss, since that would put an enormous amount of pressure on people experiencing grief. Acceptance is really the beginning of the real healing process. It is the point where resilience and the restoration of health can begin.

Unfortunately, There's No Simple Answer

The stages of grief should not be taken as a literal guide to healing or ascending through grief, life does not fit into such perfect stages. Most people and their grief episodes are different, so resiliency and recovery is usually not as simple as posting a few stages on the refrigerator and hoping you will quickly move from one to the other. In fact, some grief counselors and psychologists debate the effectiveness of the stage theory, and often wonder if the idea can be counterproductive.

A person's emotions and reactions to grief may run the gamut of each stage, but it is doubtful each will arrive at the gateway of the next stage with all aspects of the previous stage completed. Also, there is no guarantee that anyone shall arrive to any of the stages of grief in chronological order, nor should they be expected to display behaviors associated with one stage at a time. There is simply no reasonable expectation to assume that any one person will naturally adhere to this formula without psychological coaxing.

However, the five stages of grief do provide an excellent guide for grief support, as well as assessing the condition and mental state of patients through relating them to a chart of commonalities. The most important part of recovering from the loss of health is to seek out help and guidance on what to expect physically and

emotionally. Processing these experiencing within a support group of other people with a similar experience is very helpful.

## **Grief Processing exercise**

This is often a helpful way to organize and begin the process of making sense of your emotional reactions to loss.

Get a notebook and divide it into 5 sections: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression & Acceptance.

Over the course of the next week write down the sentence fragments that you have thought or said about your loss. Examples of Denial: I can't believe I have a chronic illness. I want my body and my health back. Write until you have nothing left to say about denial. When you are done, take a long walk or hike in the woods and let it go.

The next day do the same thing with Anger. The third day do the same with bargaining; Think about the would have, could have, & should have statements. After Bargaining, write about Depression. Allow yourself to express how your heart is broken over your loss of health, also write about the fact that pain of your emotional loss is great because your love for your life great. Grief over the loss of health is a sincere expression of self-love. Take another hike.

Finally, with a clear mind, review what you wrote about each of the four stages of grief and allow it to lead you to begin to accept your loss. Recognize the futility of remaining stuck in these emotional states. Recognize that without deciding to begin to accept this present situation, you could go in circles with denial, anger and bargaining because of your refusal to accept the life you are currently living. There is no right amount of time for this process to take place. The only way to get through grief is to go through grief. Consider these instructions as a path, but it's your own journey.

An additional resource is the workbook "Mindful Self Compassion Workbook" by Kathleen Neff & Christopher Germer.