

Grief

This article is about the different stages of grief. Grief, unfortunately, is something that we will all experience. There are many different ways to express grief, and in order to move forward, one needs to find a healthy way of expressing it and not to repress it

If you are experiencing grief now, seek help from a medical provider, support group, or better yet, a grief/mental health counselor that will be able to guide you through the process. EAP can help facilitate those services.

Grief by the Numbers

According to the Recovery Village, there are about 2.5 million people that die annually. It is estimated that 1.5 million children (5% of children in the US) have lost one or both parents by the age of 15. The Recovery Village stated that the most “common” causes of grief include:

- Death of a loved one (32%)
- Loss of a pet (20%)
- Death of a spouse (3%)
- Death of a child (2%)
- Other (divorce, loss of a job, suicide)

When people are grieving, it is believed that 40% (1 million people) of those grieverers meet the criteria for major depression one month after their loss and 24% (600,000 people) still meet the criteria after 2 months. It is also estimated that annually it costs organizations **\$75B** due to loss of productivity and performance.

The good news is that ninety percent (90%) of employees admit to performing better when their organization supports their emotional wellness. This is due to the feeling that they are being seen and supported by their organization.

Grief Theories

Lucy Henry, LPC, CEAP, First Sun EAP, states ***“that grief comes from a loss and not necessarily from a death. It is important for EAP’s to have a “safe space” so that employees going through grief can process it in the workplace”***. In Lucy’s 25 years of helping others process grief, she feels that grief in itself is not a mental health problem but a way of life. It is when grief is long term, and an employee cannot move forward, that it become a mental health issue.”

She states it is when employees are grieving in the workplace, it is more important to be empathic than sympathetic. Empathy creates a connection to those that are grieving, where sometimes being sympathetic can push others away.

Sympathy: I feel FOR you

Empathy: I feel WITH you (creates a deeper bond)

Finally, Ms. Henry states that in helping one move forward in the grief process it is important to find some meaning in the loss. This can be done by emulating or remembering the loss, as it encourages ways to help the family remember.

Wearing something special of the one that was lost.

Keeping a memento of one that was lost.

Making a special dinner on a specific date that was made prior to the loss.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross 5 Stages of Grief

A common theorist on grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Her model states that grief is experienced in five (5) stages. In her model she also notes that the stages of grief are not linear but fluid between each stage and one can go back and forth between each stage or visit a stage more than once.

Stage #1, Denial. This is the initial stage that helps you survive your loss. Life all of a sudden makes no sense, it is overwhelming, and you deny the news – you go numb. You do not know how life will go on. It is also your body's natural defense in that there is only so much one can handle at a time. Once shock and denial start to lessen, that is when the healing process can actually begin.

It can look like:

avoidance
procrastination
forgetting
easily distracted
mindless behaviors
keeping busy all the time
thinking/saying, "I'm fine" or "it's fine"

It can feel like:

shock
numbness
confusion
shutting down

Stage #2, Anger. In this stage there are two realities that come into play. The "preferred" reality and the "actual" reality. It is common in this stage to think that it is not fair, that life is meaningless, and blame, real or imagined, events as the cause. This stage is actually very healthy to go through as once someone gets through the anger, the REAL anger, the more quickly one will heal. It is when the "preferred" reality, the one you want, is no longer conflicting with the "actual" reality.

It can look like:

pessimism
cynicism
sarcasm
irritability
being aggressive or passive-aggressive
getting into arguments or physical fights
increased alcohol or drug use

It can feel like:

frustration
impatience
resentment
embarrassment
rage
feeling out of control

Stage #3, Bargaining. In this stage we try to give ourselves false hope. It is a "I'll give you this, if only you give me that" stage. This is where desperation takes over, as one is so interested in getting their life back to "normal", prior to the grief event. You tend to ask a lot of those "what if" statements that plague your waking moments.

It can look like:

ruminating on the future or past
over-thinking and worrying
comparing self to others
predicting the future and assuming the worst
perfectionism
thinking/saying, "I should have..." or "If only..."
judgment toward self and/or others

It can feel like:

guilt
shame
blame
fear, anxiety
insecurity

Stage #4, Depression. This is a common "accepted" emotion for grief. It is the emptiness that is felt when we realize that a or situation is gone or over. Withdrawal from life, feelings of being numb, living in a fog, trouble getting out of bed or eating are just too overwhelming for you can be seen in this stage.

It can look like:

sleep and appetite changes
reduced energy
reduced social interest
reduced motivation
crying
increased alcohol or drug use

It can feel like:

sadness
despair
helplessness
hopelessness
disappointment
overwhelmed

Stage #5, Acceptance. This is the last stage of the Kubler-Ross model. Things begin to stabilize; you come to terms with the loss; you start to adjust to the new "normal" and realize that there will be good days and bad days. As you move through this stage you begin to realize that there are more good days than bad.

It can look like:

mindful behaviors
engaging with reality as it is
"this is how it is right now"
being present in the moment
able to be vulnerable & tolerate emotions
assertive, non-defensive, honest communication
Adapting, coping, responding skillfully

It can feel like:

"good enough"
courageous
validation
self-compassion
pride
wisdom

William Worden's 4 Tasks of Grieving

Though Kubler-Ross's 5 stages is mentioned often, William Worden states that there are 4 tasks one must accomplish for the process of mourning to be accomplished. Like Kubler-Ross there is no specific order to the tasks and that each task can be revisited. Also like Kubler-Ross, Worden states each "task" must be accomplished to go through the grief process.

Task #1, To accept the reality of the loss. Like with Kubler-Ross, the act of accepting a loss can be both simple (going through a process and accepting the end) to complex (accepting the aspect of the loss but subconsciously continue to deny that there really is a loss).

Task #2, To work through the pain of grief. Worden believes that with all the different emotions that one will experience, each one will need to be worked through on its own.

Task #3, To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. This step can mean different things to different people but it is learning to adjust to a new way of thinking, feeling, and/or living with the loss. This period of adjustment can be extremely difficult depending on what the loss was and the meaning associated with the grieving individual and the object of loss (i.e. a loss of a long-time spouse would be potentially more difficult than the loss of a pet to a young child).

Task #4, To find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. Finally Worden states that the grieving individual should find an enduring connection with the loss. This can be remembering a loss of a grandmother who loved Gerber daisies so every year you plant some in her memory.

Alan Wolfelt's The 6 Needs of Mourning

Alan Wolfelt, PhD theorizes that there are 6 steps to grieving that one must process through so that you can move towards a life of meaning and purpose.

Need #1, Acknowledge the reality of the death. Dr Wolfelt states that it is important to “gently” confront the reality that someone/thing that you cared about is gone. He states that there will be times that you may replay events surrounding the event. This replay is a vital part of the mourning process.

Need #2, Embrace the pain of the loss. It is easier to avoid, block, or deny our grief than it is to embrace it. But it is a necessary step to confront it to continue with the journey through the grieving process. Sometimes your embracing the pain can only be in small doses at the time, and that is natural.

Need #3, Remember the person who died. Like Worden, Wolfelt states that it is important to still have a relationship with the loss. There will be a void that the loss has created, so it is important to have something to remind yourself of that loss. During this step it is important to embrace the past so that the future can become more open.

Examples of this are a loss of a pet and keeping a collar or favorite toy that they had or pictures of a best friend that you have lost touch with.

Need #4, Develop a new self-identity. When you lose something that is part of your self-identity, societal “norms” define you differently. The loss was a part of you and you mourn not only by showing it from the outside but within you. During this process you have to start to create a new self-identity.

Need #5, Search for meaning. When we suffer from a loss – we tend to search for meaning and question our purpose of life. Sometimes, grief may feel so overwhelming you feel like there is no purpose to going on. This is **NORMAL** and part of the grieving process. It is important to express these feelings to others be it a support group, grief counselor, or spiritual leader.

Needs #6, Receive ongoing support from others. The final step of Wolfelt's needs is receiving support from others. The type and amount of support from others will define how you process your grief. Processing your grief cannot be done alone – you should have others help you through this. Unfortunately, we do not as a society, encourage people to move at their own pace. It is expected that

those that are in mourning move on quickly, even before they may be ready. You need the ability to heal and mourn long after the death. This is where EAP, family, friends, support groups, counselors can help.

Final Thoughts

Even though one may have gone through all the stages of grief, according to any of the theorists, this is not necessarily the end. There will be days that one finds themselves, in one of the other stages, steps or needs, and will need to go through the process again. It can be months from the event and can be at a time that you least expect it. This is a time where, in the workplace, a safe space is needed, and EAP can help you with that safe space.

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Resource: <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/mental-health/grief/grief-statistics/>