



Grief and mourning rarely follow a checklist.

Understanding Bereavement

Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster

In her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross traced a five-stage emotional transition for grieving, beginning with denial and progressing through anger, bargaining and depression before arriving at acceptance. Her “stage theory,” as it came to be known, quickly became a paradigm for how people die and grieve in western culture.

Unfortunately, stage theories of grief that make loss sound so controllable are largely fiction. Though Kübler-Ross captured the range of emotions that mourners experience, recent research suggests that grief and mourning rarely follow a checklist; the progression is often complicated, untidy and unpredictable, and sometimes never fully ends. Towards the end of her life, Dr. Kübler-Ross herself recognized how far astray our understanding of grief had gone. In her book *On Grief and Grieving* (1995) she insisted that the stages were “never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages.”

Many traditional grief models seem to suggest that the person suffering a loss simply has to go through the inevitable process. They’re told to “wait it out” and “see it through,” because “in time, they will get over it.” This suggests that in the emotional aftermath of a loss, bereaved individuals are essentially passive, having to simply submit to suffering through a series of stages or a certain structured grief system over a defined period of time.

But this is not what people actually experience. We cannot understand the grief process only by some timeline system or set formula whereby a person goes passively through certain emotions, stages, phases or reactions in order to somehow eventually arrive at this destination we erroneously call acceptance.

Consider this foundational fact:

We cannot understand bereavement and every individual response to it unless we appreciate how each bereaved person’s world has been forever changed by the loss.

There is another way of thinking, one not primarily focused on one’s emotional reactions, or on their behaviors or manifestations of grief, nor on how we can control these in order to get things back to normal. There’s little sense in trying to “fix” a situation that simply cannot be fixed or trying to get “back to normal” something that has changed forever.



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We serve people better by focusing on the significance of this bereavement to the individual, not on their specific reaction to the bereavement. We need to understand the meaning of the loss to this individual. Their emotions and reactions of grief should be seen symptomatically as behaviors in response to and in protest of the need to search for meaning in what has become a strange and unwelcome world. The critical task is to help the bereaved and grieving person locate themselves in this new world.

Grief is a protest against something we didn't want, don't like, but can't change. The challenge for the helper is in enabling the mourner to come to terms with this unwelcome reality by beginning to form appropriate new patterns of emotion and behavior. Bereavement is a choiceless event, an unwelcome intruder, refusing to retreat despite our impassioned protests.

While we may be powerless to prevent grief from entering our lives, the experience of grieving itself involves hundreds of concrete choices that the bereaved person is invited or forced to make, or indeed avoid. It is a call for us to change. We have a choice of whether to work through our loss or to avoid the pain by "keeping busy" or "trying not to think about it." Impossible, by the way. Our choice is to feel and explore the grief of our loved one's absence or to suppress our private pain and focus instead on adjusting to a changed external reality. Loss may be inevitable, but what we do about it is up to us. ■



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