

# When A Loved One Is Dying

Death, Loss & Grief

## Aspects of Grief

Understanding That Helps Guide  
Our Actions  
In Times of Loss

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In 1969, in her groundbreaking book, “On Death and Dying,” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross first introduced the idea that people experience grief in identifiable stages. She named these stages, “Denial,” “Anger,” “Bargaining,” “Depression,” and “Acceptance.” Other authors of this same genre also include a pre-denial stage of “Shock.”

Dr. Kubler-Ross was clear that these stages do not happen in a particular order, although the above order, beginning with “Shock” when the death has occurred to a loved in a very sudden and unexpected way, especially involving violence, is often the way grief evolves for many people.

When we are either confronted with a loved one dying, or helping out a family member or friend to deal with their loss and grief, it is important to know that any one of the above phases, or what I like to call “aspects” of grief can occur, from the moment the prognosis of dying is given to many months or even years later.

Sometimes, the first feeling isn’t denial. Perhaps one accepts that death is near. The first feeling instead might be anger. Your friend might blurt out, “I’m grateful that she was in remission for the last ten years, but why did God give my wife cancer in the first place?” Or, in a state of shock, your friend might grab you and say, “Let’s pray. I want it to be me, not my son, on that operating table.”

And these feelings or aspects of death can come and go. You might feel angry one day, and at peace with the situation on the next day.

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You might go through all the above phases and then one morning wake up in total shock that your loved one is no longer there, even months after the event occurred.

The aspect of death that is most common and can last the longest is “depression.” This usually sets in after other emotions are exhausted. Once the loved one has died, and the blur of events leading up to and after the death and funeral are done, a deep sense of loneliness can set in. Life seems forever changed, and so many reminders occur that make one feel “empty” inside.

The first year is the most difficult as the usual “anniversaries” occur without that loved one’s presence such as birthdays, wedding days, special holidays and other moments that were remembered on a regular basis. In each of these times, it is helpful for friends and family members to support each other, and to allow these moments their import. Don’t try to ignore or hasten through them. On the other hand, it also isn’t helpful to become too tense around these days. Pay attention to them, light a candle or read a favorite poem, or place flowers.

Be patient with yourself or with your friend or family member. Be gentle. When you can, model acceptance by quietly acknowledging their feelings and offering support in simple and concrete ways. If you can’t stop by, call them up. Let them tell the same story for the third time that year. Remember that grief is a “process,” but each of us experience that “process” in our own unique way.