

ELISABETH KUBLER-ROSS – FIVE STAGES OF LOSS

These stages are true for both the dying person and for the bereaved person. They are not linear...we tend to bounce around among them, but move more and more toward acceptance.

I. Shock and Denial

“No, it’s not true.” I don’t believe it.”
(Then) “I know it but I don’t believe it.”

II. Anger

“My God, it’s real.” “It’s true!”
“Why me?” “Why them? Why not the neighbor?” “No!”
Anger is a natural and inevitable part of grief: We are angry at what we lost, or at what we should have had and didn’t. It needs to be acknowledged and expressed in order to be released.

III. Bargaining

An attempt to postpone the pain, usually with dying patients, bargaining is done privately with God; for some people, it can be an indication of a lot of guilt that needs to be addressed; for ending of relationships, it can be an attempt to conform oneself in order not to be left (“I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”).

IV. Depression

The denial is over and there is pain, sadness, often the need to tell the story to others; sometimes dying patients withdraw into the “cocoon” at this time. EKR teaches that the pain is there to teach us something and help us grow beyond the loss; we should not try to talk someone out of their pain or repress it because we’re uncomfortable. It is not a sign of weakness – in fact it often takes heroic courage to allow the pain to emerge and to feel it. In truth, some people aren’t strong enough to experience the depth of pain they feel after a significant loss.

Encourage the person; tell them (or ourselves) that they are strong enough to get through the pain to the other side of it.

V. Acceptance

If there has been enough time and attention to working through the previous four stages, a dying person will often reach a place where they are neither sad nor angry about their “fate.” For some of us, depending upon the significance of the loss, we are able to integrate the loss into the fabric of our lives – sadness may still be present at times, but this intense feeling is over and we can reinvest energy into new things in our lives.