



Grief is not predictable

by Kenneth J. Doka

When I speak or counsel people about grief, I am often asked questions such as: *How long do you think he will stay in the anger stage? When do you think I will finally accept my loss?* Questions such as this are based on what is called a “stage model” of grief. Early on in the study of grief, there were a number of varied stage models. The most famous is Kübler-Ross’ Five Stage Model. She proposed that persons who were dying experienced five stages as they approached death—denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and finally acceptance. Soon, she and her student, David Kessler, applied it to the study of grief.

The model quickly became popular. It was easy to remember. The model captured some experiences, such as anger and sadness, that often are part of the grief experience. Most importantly, it promised that at some time, we would finally accept the loss. One colleague, Dr. Robert Neimeyer, pointed out that the stage model had the narrative structure of a classic epic where the hero experiences all sorts of difficulties and trials before reaching new wisdom and a satisfying conclusion.

This model is now over a half century old, and during that time we have learned much more about grief. We now understand that while some of the feelings that Kübler-Ross described such as sadness and anger are common in grief, so are many other feelings including guilt, yearning, loneliness, sometimes even relief, to name a few. We know, too, that such feelings do not come in any order but can be all mixed together. We often feel that we are a hive of feelings, even contradictory ones, buzzing around inside of us.

We know, too, that grief is not just about feelings. It affects us physically. It can cloud our thinking. Grief influences our behavior in all sorts of ways. Some may withdraw while others seek to avert. Grief can challenge our spiritual beliefs, giving some new insights and depth to their beliefs, while others find themselves struggling

with their faith.

Most importantly, we learned that grief is individual. We all come from different backgrounds, different faiths, and different cultures. We all have distinct relationships with the person who died. Over the years, we have learned to cope in our own way. It seems naïve to think that, when experiencing the crisis of loss, we would all react the same. Our grief is as unique and individual as we are.

Much as it is comforting to believe that there is a clear pathway as we cope with a loss, we may find comfort that we may one day “accept” our loss. Yet, we now know grief is not that predictable. Instead we may find that over time our pain eases. We can function in the world again—sometimes even better with the new skills and insights we have learned on our journey. Because we always continue our bonds with those we love, we may, perhaps on anniversaries or special occasions, have surges of grief. We also learn that we have our own unique strengths that help us find our own ways to live with our loss on the journey of grief.

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