

The Journey Through The Stages of Grief

“Even
though
I walk
through
the valley
of the
shadow
of death,
I fear
no evil,
for You are
with me”
(Psalm
23:4a).

When someone you love dies, you begin a journey you would rather have avoided—a journey through grief. Nevertheless, it is an inevitable journey. What will happen as you journey through grief? What can be expected? Knowing the answer to that question can be helpful; just identifying the signposts along the way can provide a feeling of comfort as you move from one difficult stage to another.

This lesson is designed to acquaint you with the stages of grief. However, remember that the journey will not occur in a straight line.¹ You will make detours or backtrack at times. You will jump from one stage to another or even skip a stage altogether. You will feel as if you were going around in circles. You may get stuck in one stage for a long time, making the journey seem to take forever. Nevertheless, picturing grief as a journey is useful² because it suggests a final destination. Just as every journey has a purpose, your experience of grief is taking you somewhere and will eventually end. In this lesson we will consider both the journey and the destination.

THE JOURNEY

Stages Along the Way

Six stages of grief are explained in the book *Walking with Those Who Weep: A Guide to Grief Support*, by Don and Ron Williams.³ Others enumerate the stages or phases of grief differently. What the stages are called or how they are differentiated is not as important as recognizing that the journey

¹Granger E. Westberg noted that people do not pass through the stages uniformly, nor can one stage always be distinguished from another. (Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], 20.)

²Other writers have also portrayed grief as a journey, as in Don and Ron Williams, *Walking with Those Who Weep: A Guide to Grief Support* (Pulaski, Tenn.: Sain Publications, 1996), 47, 49. Doug Manning used a similar metaphor of “walk[ing] through grief” (Doug Manning, *Don’t Take My Grief Away: What to Do When You Lose a Loved One* [Philadelphia: In-Sight Books, Harper & Row, 1979], 17–18, 72).

³The information in this lesson is arranged in keeping with the stages listed in that book. (Williams and Williams, 40–58.)

through grief involves different phases.⁴

Numbness and Shock. When you lose a loved one, your first reaction is likely to be a state of numbness and shock. Your mind hears that your loved one is dead, but your heart cannot accept the news. The result is a state of shock. Your body and mind may go into an “automatic” mode. To your friends, you may seem to be doing fine; but, in fact, you have not yet begun to grapple with your loss. You go through your normal daily motions, but you do not really feel anything. This is not a time to make major decisions, as grief may prevent you from thinking rationally enough to make decisions which will affect the rest of your life.

Denial. A second reaction to the death of someone dear to you may be a state of denial. You cannot believe that your mate or child or parent is really gone; therefore, your words and actions reflect a belief that he or she is still alive. Some people actually deny the news of their loved one’s death when they first hear it; others express their denial in other ways—by speaking of the deceased in the present tense, for example, or by refusing to mourn his or her passing. Some people, for years, leave the loved one’s belongings exactly as they were.

Depression, Loneliness, Withdrawal. When the fact of death begins to sink in, a common result is a feeling of terrible loneliness. With this loneliness often comes depression, and depression causes withdrawal from others and from the usual activities of life. A depressed individual may be unable to perform the necessary activities of life. He may want to sleep most of the time, to see no one and do nothing. This may be the grieving person’s darkest hour. Don Williams wrote,

⁴Westberg listed ten stages of grief: (1) Shock. (2) Expression of emotion. (3) Depression and loneliness. (4) Physical problems. (5) Panic. (6) Guilt. (7) Anger and resentment. (8) Resistance to returning to normal activities. (9) Hope. (10) Affirmation of Reality. He included a chapter on each stage. (Westberg.) Manning discussed four stages of grief: shock, reality, reaction (including guilt and anger), recovery. (Manning, 69–72.) Jim Hughes discussed three “phases” of grief: “avoidance,” “confrontation,” and “accommodation” (Jim Hughes, *Good Grief and How to Experience It*, Class Notes, Ministries with Senior Adults, Abilene Christian University, 9–13 January 2006, 5). He also referred to a list of five phases of grief from Dr. Catherine M. Sanders: (1) shock, (2) awareness of loss, (3) conservation/withdrawal, (4) healing (the turning point), and (5) renewal. (Catherine M. Sanders, *Surviving Grief and Learning to Live Again* [New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1992], ix.)

As one begins to face the reality of [his] loss, there seems to be . . . no light at the end of the tunnel. One thinks life will never be worth living again. It is common to think of one’s own death, and to believe that it would be better if it came sooner rather than later. It is common to believe that you will never laugh, never be happy again, and that you will not be able to make it without your beloved with you.⁵

Observe Williams’ use of the word “common.” More than anything, grieving people need to know that their depressed nature and dismal outlook on life is normal for those who travel the road of grief.

Panic, Anxiety, and Anger. Negative emotions occur in confronting the reality of a loss. When you are mourning, you may feel panicky or have an insatiable desire to know the details of what happened to the deceased and why. You may be unable to think about anything but your loss, and your inability to concentrate may cause you to wonder if you are losing your mind. Anxiety may trouble you; peace of mind may elude you. You may become angry at those who, it seems, let your loved one die—doctors and nurses, for example. You may become angry at the one who has died for leaving you behind. You are likely to become angry at God for taking this loved one from you. Williams wrote, “Anger might better be labeled hurt, frustration, fear, helplessness, or various other feelings. Whatever it is, it is an emotion, and emotion will be expressed in grief, whether others give us that right or not.”⁶

Guilt and Bitterness. Other negative emotions often experienced by those who are grieving are guilt and bitterness. The bereaved person may feel guilty about what he said or did (or failed to say or do) to the deceased before death occurred. If your loved one died after a prolonged illness, you may feel relieved and then feel guilty about the sense of relief. As time passes, you may find yourself enjoying some activity and then feel guilty for feeling joy instead of sorrow! As a consequence of loss and negative feelings about that loss, some people become bitter and disillusioned. Do not let that happen in your life!

Hope and a New Reality. Eventually, after so many negative experiences, hope begins to

⁵Williams and Williams, 46–47.

⁶Ibid., 52. Some of these negative emotions are discussed in later lessons in this series.

emerge. Though you are grief-stricken, you will gradually see signs of hope that you will be able to live again, even without your lost loved one. You will accept the new reality of life without that person's physical presence. Don Williams wrote,

You are still grieving and will continue to grieve at times of special remembrances (holidays, birthday of deceased, anniversaries, etc.), but now you see the light at the end of the tunnel. You have gone back to living and you have accepted life as it is.

You begin to make major decisions once again. You can look at mementos of your loved ones and remember good times together. . . .⁷

As a result of your journey through grief, you will be a changed person. You will be more appreciative of your lost loved one, more aware that living involves loss, and better equipped to help others with their losses.⁸

THE DESTINATION

Where does the "journey through grief" end? Hughes wrote that "the purpose of grief is to help you recognize that your loved one is gone and then to make the necessary internal (psychological and spiritual) and external (social and physical) changes to accommodate that reality."⁹ He made these recommendations: (1) Change your relationship with your loved one, recognizing that he is dead and beginning to think about him in a new way. (2) Develop a new sense of yourself to reflect the many changes that occurred when you lost your loved one. (3) Take on healthy new ways of being in the world without your loved one. (4) Find new people, objects, or pursuits in which to put the emotional investment that you once had placed in your relationship with the deceased.¹⁰

In other words, the desired outcome of the grief process is that you will accept the death of your loved one, learn to think about him from a different perspective, begin to see yourself in a new light, adjust to living in a world without the deceased, and find someone or something in which to invest the emotional energy that you formerly devoted to your relationship with the

person who died.¹¹

CONCLUSION

Looking at the journey through grief as being composed of six stages may make the process seem more orderly than it really is. Even as you are grieving, you need to remember several facts about this process:

The journey is not a straight-line trip; you should not expect to travel step by step to the end.

Everyone travels at his own pace; the journey does not occur on a predetermined timetable.

The reactions/feelings that you experience at each stage are natural. They may not be logical, and they may not qualify by your standards as spiritual; but they are natural, and you should not feel guilty for reacting in these ways. To "feel bad because you feel bad"¹² will simply add to your problems.

Each stage comes to an end. While you may find it hard to believe when you are, for example, depressed or angry, you can find some comfort in knowing that each stage will pass.¹³

Christians have blessings that are not available to others who make this journey:

1. Help and comfort from God (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4a).
2. Real hope: (a) hope of the resurrection and life after death (1 Thessalonians 4:14) and (b) hope of a reunion with loved ones (Genesis 25:8; 2 Samuel 12:20–23).
3. A way to turn misery into ministry (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).¹⁴

Perhaps the best news for the Christian is that, as you travel the journey of grief, Jesus—who wept at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35) and who said, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20)—will go with you. Coy Roper

¹¹Counselor Pam Vredevelt said that we can be "transformed" by "life's disappointments and painful losses." She added that after we have faced, embraced, and processed our pain, and then have let go of it, "in time we sense that new depth of character, emotional maturity, and spiritual awakening are coming to the surface. As we come to the end of ourselves, we enter into a vital new intimacy with God" (Pam Vredevelt, *Letting Go of Disappointments and Painful Losses* [Sisters, Oreg.: Multnomah Publishers, 2001], 115).

¹²Ibid., 75–80.

¹³Manning emphasized this fact as he discussed the stages of grief. (Manning, 69–71.)

¹⁴Hughes, 6.

⁷Ibid., 55.

⁸Ibid., 57.

⁹Hughes, 5.

¹⁰Ibid.