

The Process of Grief

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Grief is an essential part of Recovery and a necessary path to Serenity. It is the process of a forced adjustment. Elizabeth Kubler Ross unveiled the stages of grief which have now become well known. However, the connection between the grief process and recovery is not so well known. We will attempt to provide some enlightenment on that process with this article.

Grief is the process of adjusting to a major trauma, a deep loss. It is an adjustment that is unwelcomed, and unwanted. In the case of the death of a loved one, it is the result of a permanent, non-negotiable, final change. The psyche goes into a state of shock and self preservation kicks in. Primal forces take over the mind and spirit and assist the individual in getting through the ordeal. The first stage, observed by Dr. Ross is that of denial. Denial is the psyche's attempt to push away the pain and trauma of the event. It is an attempt to distance oneself from the harsh and brutal reality imposed upon the person by outside circumstances. It is a type of self deception, attempting to hold on to past reality and avoid making the necessary change toward the feared, undesirable outcome. It is the hallmark of the unwillingness to make the transition being forced against the person's will. The second stage is anger. This is the primal response to forced change, and emotional pain. Tragedy and loss never come at a convenient time. Although it is often associated with negativity, anger is not a negative element. It is simply a human emotion. Anger is often necessary in order to stimulate an adrenaline release, or the fight/flight response. However, the energy produced by anger can often lead to destruction. Meditation can help one navigate through the troubled waters of anger. One may focus on heroes of the past, tragic figures such as Helen Keller or Beethoven who were marked by difficulty, yet overcame great obstacles. One might choose to meditate on political figures, or religious heroes such as Christ himself and the pain he endured. It does no good to attempt to suppress this anger or to deny its existence. However, negative processes such as victimization and self pity need to be recognized and resisted. The third stage identified by Dr. Ross is that of bargaining. This is a further attempt to avoid the dreaded change and to get back to normal. One thing must be clear to those in the grief process. It is all about change. The events, experiences, circumstances and relationships that came together to contribute to an individual's identity have now changed. Energy spent trying to "get back to normal" and cling to the past produces negative results. In essence, a part of the grieving person dies or ceases to be. Death is the ultimate negative Principle, the greatest negative energy. One may try to talk God into making a special deal. One may resort to "magical" thinking. In spite of these attempts, change is inevitable. The person traveling through the grief process has been forever scarred, altered, never to return to the previous state of innocence or awareness. This "death" must be embraced. The new emerging person must be welcomed. The deepest and darkest part of the grief process is the fourth, depression. Acceptance and the resulting serenity that accompanies it cannot be attained without going through this long, dark tunnel. With depression comes the lack of energy, the difficulty of the smallest, most mundane task. Avoidance and the desire to distract oneself are common during depression. Deep sorrow, emotional pain, the sense of loss mark this dreadful stage. These bitter herbs must be tasted, the loss is undeniable, the individual is completely powerless to change the results or circumstances. This is the glacier beneath the tip of the iceberg and it is often where many get stuck. Most people believe that those stuck in the grief process remain in denial; however, depression is the stage where many lose their way. A person may become trapped in victim thinking, attributing his loss to another person or object. Blame may cause one to focus his or her anger upon a person or event, thus preventing true acceptance. Even though the change has already taken place, those who are trapped in depression refuse to accept the change and make the necessary adjustments. They are in fact now living in an alternate reality. Meditation is essential during this phase. One must simply meditate and embrace positive energy. In this stage, simple basic truth is most effective and is the fastest path to healing. Body, soul and spirit have been drained of energy. Perhaps this is why the tradition of bringing flowers came into existence. The significance of the new life represented in the flower. also its temporary nature is a reminder that this is the normal course of things. Meditation on a flower, or a household pet, or simply the warm sunshine can be tremendously helpful. Visualizing oneself changing can also be helpful. It can bring comfort knowing that the departed loved one has taken a piece of the individual with them and they have been forever altered. A symbol of the change may be helpful such as a piece of jewelry or article of clothing. Butterflies, flowers, sunrise and set, babies, fall leaves are all worthy of meditation. The final phase in this process is acceptance. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change..." Acceptance means one stops running. One faces that which he has so desperately been trying to avoid. One reaches down and musters up the courage to take the necessary action to move forward. This may take the form of a simple act such as cleaning up the house. Attempts to arrive at this stage while bypassing depression will result in denial. However, once one has swallowed the bitter pill of sorrow it is possible to accept the change required by the passing or the loss. With this acceptance comes the dawn of hope and the peace of serenity. There is a solemnity that accompanies this stage, a type of sobriety. The magical thinking of denial is now gone and a sober assessment of damage done is in one's awareness. However, positive energy provided by Hope and renewal take hold and the task is now do-able. In terms of recovery from addiction, one is now ready to begin with Step 1 of the Twelve Steps.