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THE GRIEF CONTINUUM: THREE STAGES OF GRIEF WORK

by Phil Rich, Ed.D., MSW.

Grief is an inevitable part of life. For some, it's a relatively quick journey lasting a few months, for others, a journey that may take years to complete. This process of working through grief is frequently referred to as "grief work."

The Grief Continuum

Although the grief experience is intensely personal, there are some fairly typical stages of bereavement. These range from initial shock, to anguish and despair once the realization of loss sinks in, to eventual acceptance. Within each stage are specific emotional and psychological tasks which must be worked through completely before people can move on to successfully complete the tasks of the next stage.

Although these stages are generally a predictable part of the mourning process, grief doesn't always move in a straight line. The stages tend to flow together and fluctuate, so it's not always possible to tell which stage people are in. Emotions see-saw, and overwhelming feelings pass, then return. Moods wash in and out like the tide. Just when people think they are "over" it, a sound, smell, or image can send them back into emotional turmoil. This back and forth movement may occur over a period of months, or even years.

Although varying from person to person, it's not unusual for the active stages of grieving to last 1 to 2 full years or more. But understanding the stages of grief can also help the bereaved see that they aren't alone in their confusion, turmoil, and pain, and that things improve as they progress through the stages. It can also help people aid to complete the necessary grief work, which includes:

- facing the reality of loss
- working through painful memories
- experiencing the full range of emotions associated with loss
- coping with the situational and lifestyle changes resulting from the loss

- adapting to the loss, and reconfiguring their own life

The Stages of Grief

The goal of grief work is not to find ways to avoid or bypass the emotional turmoil and upset brought by loss. Instead, its goals involve working through the tasks and emotions of each s of grief.

Stage 1: "Acclimation and Adjustment"

In this first stage, the tasks largely involve dealing with the initial emotional shock and disorientation often brought by death:

- adjusting to changes brought by the loss
- functioning appropriately in daily life
- keeping emotions and behaviors in check
- accepting support

Stage 2: "Emotional Immersion and Deconstruction"

Although the initial impact of the death has passed, emotions are often deeply felt during this stage. The bereaved face and have to deal with the changes that the death has brought, and challenges to their beliefs about the way things should be. This stage incorporates the most aspects of grief work. It's not that this stage is any more intense than the first stage -- in fact difficult to imagine that anything could be more intense than the period immediately following loss. But during this stage, people are likely to become deeply immersed in their feelings, and internally-focused. It's also quite common for the bereaved to undergo a "deconstruction" of values and beliefs, as they question why their loved one was taken from them. The tasks associated with Stage 2 include:

- contending with reality
- development of insight
- reconstructing personal values and beliefs
- acceptance and letting go

Stage 3: "Reclamation and Reconciliation"

In this final stage many issues about the death have been resolved, and the bereaved more begin to reclaim and move on with their lives. This stage is generally thought to be one mark "recovery" from grief. But the loss of someone close leaves a permanent mark on people's lives in the sense that things can't be restored to the way they were before the death. However, people can begin to rebuild, creating a new life for themselves and re-engaging with the world around them. As this stage ends, the bereaved become reconciled to the death itself, and the changes brought to their lives. Perhaps most important, they begin to live in the present, rather than

past, re-establish who they are in the world, and plan a future. The primary tasks of this stage

- development of social relations
- decisions about changes in life style
- renewal of self-awareness
- Acceptance of responsibility

Respecting Loss and Bereavement

Talking about "recovering" from grief is almost disrespectful, as life is never restored to the way it was before the loss of someone close. When people talk of recovery, they really refer to overcoming grief and adapting to life after the death. This is an important distinction to draw because the purpose of grief work is not to "get over" loss, but to adjust to its consequences and restore balance.

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11/09/99

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