

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF



GRIEF COURSE

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Week 1

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"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim." - Vicki Harrison

We live in a grief-illiterate society. Most of us were never taught how to grieve. We have no familiarity with or understanding of grief, which can deepen and prolong our feelings of pain and sorrow. We feel uncomfortable with grief and don't know how to talk about it with others or how to reach out to those who can help, and we end up feeling lost and alone. As a pastor and grief educator, I help grieving people to better understand grief.

What is Grief?

Grief is a natural response to any loss. Grief is change. Loss brings changes into our lives, usually ones we didn't want. Grief is the recognition of that change, but it's also the loss of a connection. At its core, grief is love; it's love for whatever we had that is now gone.

Please give yourself permission to grieve. You have that right. Don't ever let someone take your grief away from you. You give yourself permission to grieve by recognizing your need to grieve. Grieving is not weakness nor the absence of faith. Grieving is as natural as crying when you're sad, sleeping when you're tired or sneezing when you're nose itches. Grieving is God's way of healing your broken heart.

What's the Distinction between Grief and Grieving?

Mary-Frances O'Connor, author of *The Grieving Brain*, makes a distinction between *grief* and *grieving*. Grief is that overwhelming emotion that comes over us like a wave after we lose our loved one. The feeling is so intense that we want to know, when will this be over? If you think the waves of grief will stop at some point you will be very disappointed and think something is wrong with you when they don't. The waves will decrease in frequency and intensity over time but never completely go away.

Grieving on the other hand is the process of change that occurs after the death of our loved one. After our loss we have a huge problem. We now need to figure out how to live in a world without our loved one. Grieving is a form of learning; it's learning how to carry the absence of our loved one with us and navigate our new existence on earth. Grieving is our way of processing, changing, adapting, and working through our loss of love. Through the grieving process, we slowly learn how to comfort ourselves in our pain. As we become more familiar with the waves, we learn how to better deal with them, even how to even ride some of the waves.

At 45, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's COO, and mother of two, found her husband, Dave, collapsed on the floor of their home gym. He never woke again. She was devastated. Two weeks later, as she prepared for a father-child activity, she cried in front of her friend Phil:

"But I want Dave," she said. Her friend put his arm around Sheryl and said, "Option A is not available. So, let's just kick the crap out of Option B." Life is never perfect. Sooner or later, we all lose Option A in our lives. Navigating the grief journey is learning how to live and thrive with Option B.

What's the Difference between Grief and Mourning?

Grief is what's going on inside us, while mourning is what we do on the outside. The internal work of grief is ongoing, that's why I like to refer to it as our grief journey. Mourning is an outward sign of our grief.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who mourn*" (Matthew 5:4). The present tense indicates that the mourning is continual. He doesn't say, "*Blessed are those who mourned.*" The reality is there is no timeline for grief and no cure. We carry our loss in our hearts for the rest of our lives. Jesus promises us comfort as we mourn. He doesn't promise to take away all our pain, but he does promise us solace.

Bereaved

A bereaved person is one who has a relative or close friend that has recently died. The Old English word *bereave* meant *to rob*. The word implies we've been robbed or stripped of someone or something, often suddenly and unexpectedly, and sometimes by force. I concur with this definition. I felt like I was I robbed when I lost my daughter to a brain tumor, like she was snatched out of my life. It was as if cancer took her life by force and there was nothing I could do. My daughter's life on earth was robbed from me and my future with her was ripped off.

Rending a Garment in Grief

In biblical times it was common for Jews to mourn by tearing their clothes. It's natural to get angry when someone is snatched out of your life. Rending one's garments was a tangible expression of grief and anger in the face of death. For example, David tore his clothes when Saul and his beloved friend Jonathan were killed (2 Samuel 1:11-12).

Why did he do that? Because in an agrarian society, clothing was a very valuable commodity. Nothing was mass-produced. Clothes were time-intensive and expensive so most people in those days had a very limited wardrobe. People who tore their clothes were showing how upset they felt inside. By damaging one of their more important and expensive possessions, they reflected the depth of their emotional pain. This idea was magnified when people chose to put on *sackcloth* after tearing clothes. Sackcloth was a coarse and scratchy material and was extremely uncomfortable. As with tearing their garments, people put on sackcloth to externally display the discomfort and pain they felt inside.

Grieving with Hope

All of us will grieve at some point in life, but Christians should grieve slightly different than the world, because we have hope even in our deepest times of sorrow. The Bible affirms grief. Jesus modeled grief in his life. The Bible also instructs Christians how to grieve. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 that believers will grieve, will have their share of trials, tragedies, and difficult losses. You don't get excused because you are a Christ follower.

Paul says, "... We want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died ... So, encourage each other with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14,18 NLT). Put simply, as believers, we grieve with hope. Hope doesn't nullify grief; it isn't a zero-sum game, rather hope puts grief into an eternal context.

I'm not saying non-believers can't grieve fully and find hope again for living. I'm saying believers are called to grieve differently. The biblical approach to grieving is a hopeful approach. It is our hope in the person, resurrection, and love of Christ that allows us to find comfort even in the pain. We grieve well to live well.

Timeline of Grief

While we know there's no timeline in grief and no two people experience grief in the same way, this timeline may be helpful to gauge interventions. When a friend tells me they are driving a mile out of their way to get to work every day because they are triggered by the hospital where their loved one died. I would encourage them to drive around the hospital and take care of themselves in these early days. At three years I would suggest that it might be time to face that fear. This timeline may be helpful to gauge interventions:

- *Anticipatory grief*: Grief before the death
- *Acute grief*: When it just happened
- *Early grief*: The first two years
- *Mature grief*: The rest of their lives

Models of Grief

Models of grief are guidelines of what people may experience when grieving. However, if you do not fit a model, it does not mean there is something wrong with the way you experience grief. It is important to remember that there is no one way to grieve, and people move through a variety of stages of grief in various ways. The stages were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into a neat package but are responses to loss that many people have, yet there is not a typical response to loss because there is no typical loss. Below are five models of grief to help you better understand your grief.

**How we
want grief
to work**



**How grief
actually
works**



Doug Manning: Grief is Like Peeling an Onion

My favorite illustration and model of grief was created by Doug Manning. I had the privilege of being trained by Doug, a former pastor turned grief expert, in how to perform Celebration of Life memorial services. He describes grief as being a lot like peeling an onion. It comes off one layer at a time and you cry a lot. Our grief is as unique as our lives. There's no schedule, no right way to think, and no right way to peel away the layers.

Grief is an emotionally sloppy process, not a neat series of stages each person passes through in a prescribed period. The days between a death and a funeral service are like the paper-thin outer skin of an onion that comes off easily and blows away in the wind. Those days are when the bereaved person is in shock and is surrounded by family and friends trying to comfort them.

The funeral is often the climactic event in the care and comfort as the bereaved have their grief witnessed. Once that superficial outer skin is removed, then the real grieving process begins in three identifiable layers:

Reality

If you take the thin outer skin of an onion, crumble it up and toss it up into the wind, it's a good picture of the initial shock of grief. It is a period of confusion and a denial of reality as everything is in a whirl. A few weeks after the funeral, the shock wears off and the reality of the loss sets in. That's when you break down.

Reaction

At some point, anger will emerge. Anger is a secondary emotion that we bolt over to when we are hurt. When the anger comes out, it means the bereaved is starting to fight back. Anger needs a place to focus. The object of anger may be the deceased person, a doctor, a pastor, a family member or even God. I got extremely angry at God when my daughter died even though I knew he didn't cause the cancer, but he did allow it to happen. Anger is a healthy emotion in grief. I'd be concerned for you if you weren't angry after your loved one died. It only becomes unhealthy when it becomes internalized and self-directed.

Reconstruction

Grief can be traumatic but can also be transformative. Eventually, the grieving person will begin to progress on their grief journey as they reconstruct their life. At this point, the bereaved need a companion to walk alongside them, to listen to their anger and help them realize that life will never be like it was before the loss. The pain that comes from grief is brutal but be assured that the sharp pain will eventually become a dull ache.

If I gave each person who reads this book an onion, no two people would have an onion alike. Onions come in different sizes, shapes, and colors, so the dimensions of grief are very different. Manning's model includes four dimensions of grief: significance, lonely, delayed, shattered,

The grief following the death of a child has a *significance* dimension. Grief after losing a child is a process of hanging on, trying to not say goodbye because you don't feel like the child has lived long enough to establish their significance.

Grief following stillbirth has a *lonely* dimension, because the mother is the only one that really knows that child. She bonded with him from the moment of conception, and she knows her child. The father may have a connection with the child because he felt him kicking in the womb, but the mother really knows that child. Her grief then becomes an issue of explaining the value of that life to a world that thinks that stillbirth is minor grief.

Murder or sudden death has a *delayed* dimension to it. Especially murder because until they catch the person, have the trial (which is usually a horrible experience for the family) and the trial ends, the grief is kind of on hold. With other kinds of sudden death, the shock is so deep that it takes a while before they can begin to deal with the grieving process.

Suicide has a *shattered* dimension. You feel like the onion has just been blown apart, and you must put it back together before you can peel it. Families will often research who said what, what was done, who caused it. Manning once said, "*Twas the final straw that broke the camel's back, then men noticed the fiendish pack, but who among them saw the next to the last straw.*"

Suicide is the culmination of a complex package, a combination of all kinds of straws that one day become overwhelming. It's not ever just the last straw that is to blame.

One of the difficulties with grieving suicide loss is that everybody feels guilty. We think we should have known, and that we should have been able to stop it. Neither of those is true. The only one who could have stopped the suicide is the one who died of suicide. Suicide victims often seem better just before the suicide; therefore, it is very difficult to know.

Sudden death and death by suicide can complicate the grief process because they are so traumatic and because the family and friends didn't get a chance to say goodbye to their loved one.

Elisabeth Kübler Ross: Five Stages of Grief plus Kessler's Sixth Stage

These five stages of grief are tools to help us frame our feelings. They are not steps on a linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them in a prescribed order. Dr. Ross describes five emotional stages people pass through on their grief journey: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages, and the ease of remembering them through the acronym DABDA, have become part of our popular culture. Dr. Ross first identified the stages of dying in her book *On Death and Dying* as stages people passed through prior to death and later applied them to be stages of grief.

Denial helps us to survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes overwhelming and meaningless. Life doesn't make sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We are emotionally numb and wonder how we can ever go on, why should we go on. Denial helps us get through the day and helps us cope and makes survival possible.

Anger is an important and necessary stage of the healing process. Allow yourself to feel your anger although it may seem limitless. The more you feel it, the more it will dissipate and the more you will heal. You may ask, "*Where is God in this?*" I have a friend that lost his wife to sudden death. He began his eulogy by asking, *What the hell God?* I told him after the funeral service how proud I was that he was voicing his anger. Underneath our anger is pain. It's natural to feel deserted or abandoned after a loss, but we live in a society that fears anger. Your anger is an indication of the intensity of your love.

Bargaining is that stage where you find yourself negotiating with yourself, with people around you, with fate, or even with God to try to change or undo your loss. Before Jackie died, I begged God to take me and not her. After she died, I would have given anything to bring her back. We want life to return to normal; we want our loved one restored.

Depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is a natural response to a great loss and a part of the grieving process. When the loss fully settles into your soul, the realization that your loved one isn't coming back is depressing. Depression is one of the necessary steps toward healing.

Acceptance is confused with being all right with what has happened. This is not the case. I have never felt okay about losing Jackie. This stage is about accepting the reality that my daughter is physically gone and that this is my new permanent reality on this earth. I will never like this reality, but I have learned to accept it and live with the fact that I now live in a world where my daughter is missing.

David Kessler worked with Dr. Ross and saw the need to add a sixth stage to Dr. Ross' five stage model. He wrote a book called, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. After Kessler lost his son, he felt he couldn't stop with the fifth stage of acceptance. It wasn't enough, he wanted more, he wanted to find meaning from his son's loss.

Meaning is the sixth stage in the expanded Kübler-Ross model. You might think, "*There is no meaning in my loved one's death.*" I understand. Meaning doesn't take away the pain but it does give it a cushion. There is no meaning in death, the meaning is in us. It's keeping our loved one's memory alive. It's a way to honor our loved ones. It's discovering what part of them lives in you that you can take into your new future. Or, if they died tragically, how can you change the world so other people don't die that way.

Finding meaning after loss is deeply personal, something you define for yourself, and can look very different for each person. If you have found meaning after you loss, I am so very happy for you. And if you are still trying to figure it out, don't give up hope.

Rick Warren: Six Stages of Grief

Rick Warren is my mentor, friend, and hero. I've met him three decades ago and he trained me as a pastor and church planter. He believed in me as a young man, and I'm forever grateful. Rick is the founder of Saddleback Church and the author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, one of the best-selling books of all time. I had the privilege of working with him at Saddleback for five years until he retired. Rick has an amazing ability to teach profound concepts and make them understandable, which he does with grief. He developed his own grief model after his 27-year-old son, Matthew, died from suicide.

Like me, Rick is a grieving pastor and dad. Sixteen weeks after Matthew's death, Rick taught a series called, *Getting Through What You're Going Through*. In this series he identified six discernible stages of reaction to loss: shock, sorrow, struggle, surrender, sanctification, and service.

Shock is experienced when your world falls apart. Matthew dealt with mental health issues, but it was still a huge shock to the Warren family when he died from suicide. For the first month, Rick was waiting for Matthew to come in the door. *When's my son going to walk in?* Rick couldn't believe it happened; it was so sudden.

Sorrow is experienced when your heart breaks because of your loss. Sorrow is a feeling of profound sadness. But sorrow is also a godly emotion. The only reason we're able to grieve is because we're made in the image of God. Jesus was a man acquainted with sorrow. Grieving is healthy, it's the way God designed for us to respond to life's transitions.

Struggle is stage you experience when you don't understand. Nothing seems to make sense. It's where you ask the why questions: Why me? Why now? Why did this happen? Some people will tell you that why is not a good question. I disagree. I think it's a great question and I still ask it. You're probably not going to get answers to your whys, but it's still okay to ask them. God can handle it. Even Jesus asked why. On the cross Jesus said, My God! My God! Why...? Life is a struggle, and the real test of your faith is what do you do when you don't get the answer, because most likely you won't.

Surrender is the stage is where you stop asking and start surrendering and accepting your loss. Surrender is the path to peace. Rick said, I'd rather have all my questions unanswered and walk with God than not walk with God and have all my questions answered. I never questioned my faith in God, but I questioned God's plan. Not everything that happens in this world is God's will. God permits it but we live in a world where we have choices. Rick continues to affirm God's goodness and love and doesn't blame God for his son's death.

Sanctification is the stage where your life begins to change. There is no growth without change. There is no change without loss. There is no loss without grief. There is no grief without pain. The pain of our loss can motivate us to change. Loss can be traumatic, but it can also be transformative. Sanctification is the change process we go through like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Sanctification is a theological term that deals with growing into spiritual maturity. Over time, we can become better because of our loss rather than bitter. We can become more compassionate and empathetic human beings.

Service is the final stage, and deals with using your pain for good, not wasting your hurt. It's realizing that God wants to use your hurt and pain to help others. Who can better help parents of a Down syndrome child than parents who have had a Down syndrome child? Who can better help somebody struggling with an addiction than somebody who struggled with an addiction? I have an undergraduate degree, two master's degrees and a doctorate degree but my greatest training and experience in grief came from losing my daughter. I understand the deep pain that comes from such a loss and how it affects life. I know grief firsthand and that qualifies me to help others more so than all the degrees I've earned.

I've dedicated the rest of my life to serving grieving people and helping them in their grief. God is compassionate and "the one who so wonderfully comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials. And why does he do this? So that when others are troubled, needing sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 - *TLB*).

J. William Worden: Four Tasks of Grief

Psychologist J. William Worden provides a framework of four tasks that helps us understand how people journey through grief. Healing happens gradually as grievors address these tasks, in no particular order, going back and forth from one to another over time. Worden suggests these four tasks must be accomplished for the process of mourning to be completed and for equilibrium to be reestablished.

Task 1: To Accept the Reality of the Loss.

Although you know intellectually the person has died, you may still be in shock and not believe it. For example, the reality may begin to set in when you must call the mortuary, attend the funeral, or pick up the ashes.

Task 2: To Process the Pain of Grief

Grief is experienced emotionally, cognitively, physically, and spiritually. You must experience the pain of what you have lost in your mind, body, and soul. Allow the emotion into your consciousness and begin to take steps to process your feelings. This process takes time and differs depending on the individual.

Task 3: To Adjust to a World Without the Deceased

Internal adjustments are made as you adapt to your new identity without your loved one. External adjustments include trying learning new skills and taking on new responsibilities. Spiritual adjustments happen as you wrestle with questions about your beliefs and the meaning and purpose of life.

Task 4: To Find an Enduring Connection with the Deceased While Embarking on a New Life

Gradually you create a balance between remembering the person who died and living a full and meaningful life. For some people, life stopped when their loved one died and they are not able to resume their life in a meaningful way, with a different sense of connection to their loved one who has died. This last task takes time and can be one of the most difficult to accomplish.

Worden, J. William, 2009. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, Fourth Edition, Springer, N.Y.

Dave Page – Ocean Waves of Grief

I grew up in Southern California and one of my favorite activities was, and still is, going to the beach. When I was a kid, my parents owned an apartment complex in Laguna Beach that we often frequented and it was there I learned about the ocean, waves, boogie boarding, surfing, and grief.

After my daughter died, I felt like I was drowning in grief. It was hard to breathe. Going through the grief process is like being caught in a set of big waves. Waves of anger, doubt, denial, sadness, depression, loneliness, helplessness, and confusion kept crashing down on me. Maybe you feel like that right now?

When a reminder of your loved one pops up suddenly, it's a wave of grief. Maybe it's a happy memory or photo. Grief waves and remembering a loved one because of certain triggers are all perfectly normal responses to loss, no matter how long ago the loss took place. They are a lifelong response to loss.

Despite what some experts say, the grief process is not a neat and tidy set of stages you successfully go through and move on from. Rather grief comes in waves. Emotional waves that come in all different sizes and shapes that knock the hell out of you. Grief is brutal.

I remember one time when a set of waves came out of nowhere and I got trapped in the set. I was thrust under water for what seemed like eternity but was only a few seconds. I just wanted to breathe. I tried to catch my breath. When I did surface, I found another huge wave bearing down on me and under I went.

When the wave breaks, you're broadsided, and find yourself tossing, spinning, and bouncing off the bottom of the ocean with a mouth full of salt water and sand. If you fight, it takes longer to get to the surface. But if you float with the current (your body is buoyant), you will rise to the top. Floating when we are frightened is difficult. Dealing with death and the grief that follows is similar.

Going to the beach has taught me to respect the ocean and its power. Water is one of the most powerful forces on earth, so is grief. You never want to turn your back on the ocean. I remember when my mom and I were walking on some rocks in the ocean looking at starfish. We turned our backs just for a few seconds to walk back to shore when a big wave came out of nowhere and knocked us off our feet and dragged us across the rocks. We emerged bloody and bruised but learned an important lesson. Turning your back on the ocean is like turning your back on grief and ignoring it, it will hurt you.

When a woman on the Reddit website was mourning the loss of her best friend and seeking support by chatting with strangers, a commenter who called himself *old man* wrote a piece that went viral about how grief comes in waves. Here is part of what he wrote:

In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you'll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything...and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

Somewhere down the line, and it's different for everybody, you find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas, or landing at O'Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow you will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering ...but you'll come out.

Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow you don't really want them to. But you learn that you'll survive them. And other waves will come. And you'll survive them too.

The waves won't stop coming but you can survive the waves. God will help you breathe and will make a way for you. You'll gain confidence along the way and discover that grief will not take you down. You will survive. Remember, your life will never be the same, it will be different. But sometimes, *different* can be okay as well.

The End

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