

Acceptance — "It's going to be okay."; "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it."

In this last stage, the individual begins to come to terms with her/his mortality or that of a loved one.

Kübler-Ross claimed these steps do not necessarily come in the order noted above, nor are all steps experienced by all patients, though she stated a person will always experience at least two. Often, people will experience several stages in a "roller coaster" effect—switching between two or more stages, returning to one or more several times before working through it. Those who experience problems working through the stages should consider professional grief counselling or support groups. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model)

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Equipes Notre-Dame

A Teams Response to Bereavement

Equipes Notre-Dame (Teams of Our Lady) started in France in 1938, and has spread worldwide, reaching England in 1959 and Ireland in 1964. As a consequence, many long-standing Teams will have been touched by the death of one of their members. This short document distils some of the wisdom gained from individuals and Teams living through bereavement, and hopefully forms a useful guide for those who have not yet experienced this.

Loss and Bereavement

To deal with grief sensitively in Teams, it may be useful to consider the process of grief. John Bowlby was the first to describe reactions to loss in his work with children admitted to hospital. He described denial, protest, despair and detachment. Kübler-Ross later added bargaining, when developing her model of Five Stages of Grief in her research with dying patients (see appendix).

The duration of grief may last from 6 weeks to 6 months and for many people much longer than this. In addition, grief may reappear at other critical times, such as the first anniversary, birthdays, Christmas, Easter, and wedding anniversaries. Grief may involve a review of the relationship and time spent together, a response to any mementos and symbols of the relationship: all aspects that need to be revisited, before people can "let go" and move on to achieve resolution and acceptance.

The duration of the grief process varies and can depend on the level of attachment to the person mourned; whether there was any opportunity to say goodbye or resolve any outstanding issues; whether other intervening issues have arisen; the meaning of the loss and the support provided.

Grief may not be resolved without professional help. Such grief will include detachment; withdrawal from relationships, and preoccupation with the loss. People prone to depression or in a particularly ambivalent relationship with the deceased

may develop a bout of depression or on-going unremitting grief. Other forms of such grief are reactions that are too intense, too prolonged or distorted – like detachment or on-going hatred and inability to respond warmly to others.

Resolution of grief and helping people to “let go” can be facilitated by participating with the bereaved person in the appropriate rituals surrounding death such as viewing the body, saying the Rosary at the viewing, the liturgy of the burial ceremony, eulogy, burial, cremation, Mass or spreading of the ashes etc. If there are children or grandchildren, their participation in these normal rituals is important. There are different cultural norms in different countries and societies and it is important that the bereaved and their families are asked about these and that their expected practices are followed.

Bereavement usually refers to the death of one of the Team members. However, in this document we use the term to cover other major tragedies such as separation, divorce, and death of a relative or child, suicide or even a couple deciding to leave the team. The loss of a job is also heart-breaking and a huge cross to bear. In addition some of the comments will be applicable to Teams with couples who cannot have children.

Responding to Bereavement

This can be divided into the acute phase of grieving and the on-going normal process. In the immediate situation it is important to spend time as is appropriate with the Team member. If for them the Team is family then a greater responsibility is incumbent upon the Team. All the normal grieving processes should be followed and as many as is possible of the Team would want to participate in the funeral if possible.

The major grief is that of the bereaved, but the Team itself also suffers bereavement. Sharing this with the bereaved can be some support.

It is important to stress that each individual suffers in a different way. Grief has no fixed time, it can come and go, and may last years. Some people can gradually pass through it. Others can seem to be doing well, and then hit a “brick wall”. There is no such thing as a fixed period of mourning, after which we should pull ourselves together.

Appendix – The Five Stages of Grief

Kübler-Ross originally applied these stages to people suffering from terminal illness, later to any form of catastrophic personal loss (job, income, freedom). This may also include significant life events such as the death of a loved one, divorce, drug addiction, the onset of a disease or chronic illness, an infertility diagnosis, as well as many tragedies and disasters. The stages, popularly known by the acronym DABDA, include:

Denial — “I feel fine.”; “This can't be happening, not to me.”

Denial is usually only a temporary defence for the individual. This feeling is generally replaced with heightened awareness of possessions and individuals that will be left behind after death.

Anger — “Why me? It's not fair!”; “How can this happen to me?”; “Who is to blame?”

Once in the second stage, the individual recognizes that denial cannot continue. Because of anger, the person is very difficult to care for due to misplaced feelings of rage and envy.

Bargaining — “I'll do anything for a few more years.”; “I will give my life savings if...”

The third stage involves the hope that the individual can somehow postpone or delay death. Usually, the negotiation for an extended life is made with a higher power in exchange for a reformed lifestyle. Psychologically, the individual is saying, “I understand I will die, but if I could just do something to buy more time...”

Depression — “I'm so sad, why bother with anything?”; “I'm going to die soon so what's the point... What's the point?”; “I miss my loved one, why go on?”

During the fourth stage, the dying person begins to understand the certainty of death. Because of this, the individual may become silent, refuse visitors and spend much of the time crying and grieving. This process allows the dying person to disconnect from things of love and affection. It is not recommended to attempt to cheer up an individual who is in this stage. It is an important time for grieving that must be processed.

Selected Bibliography

Called to be in Teams, A look at the role of widows and widowers in teams and how to support them. Teams of Our Lady, Region of Great Britain, Trinidad and Tobago (1998).

Spiritual Guidance

A Practical Guide to the Spiritual Care of the Dying Person. The Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales. (2010) CTS. ISBN 978-1-86082-666-5.

Christian experiences of grief

A Grief Observed, C.S. Lewis. (1961) HarperCollins (Paperback, 2009 ISBN 9780060652739).

Self-help when ready to come out of your grief

Twelve Pathways to feeling better in yourself, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins (1980) Growth Associates ISBN: 0-918834-08-2

Other Faiths

Multi-Faith Group for Healthcare Chaplaincy. Website at www.mfghc.com. MFGHC includes representatives of the nine World Faiths: Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian Faiths, and the website has considerable resources on these faiths, and others.

Further Reading on Studies of Loss

Attachment and Loss (vol. 1): Attachment, John Bowlby (1999) [1969]. (2nd ed.). Basic Books. ISBN 0-465-00543-8

Attachment and Loss (vol. 2): Separation: Anxiety & Anger, John Bowlby (1973). Hogarth Press. ISBN 0712666214

Attachment and Loss (vol. 3): Loss: Sadness & Depression, John Bowlby (1980). Hogarth Press. ISBN 0-465-04238-4

A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital, James Robertson and John Bowlby. DVD. 1952. www.concordmedia.org.uk.

On Death and Dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, E. (1969), Routledge, ISBN 0415040159

On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, E. (2005) Simon & Schuster Ltd, ISBN 0743263448

The bereaved person is welcome to remain in Teams as long as they wish. For those who wish to continue, there is nothing in the constitution of Teams that would preclude this. The rest of the Team may have to spell this out.

Remember that there are advantages for a single person who remains in their Team:-

- Being able to discuss matters of a deeper nature with members of the opposite sex.
- Being loved and supported.
- Listening to others.
- Sharing Memories.
- A non-threatening environment.

In addition, Team members are not threatened by the presence of a single woman/man in the group.

It is appropriate for the rest of the team to meet and decide how to offer help and handle the first Team meeting. There are simple practical details, minor house-keeping issues at the Team meeting to smooth the way – such as suggesting that the bereaved shares last at the table, or that one couple pick them up and bring them to the meeting.

Initial meetings (and those before an anticipated bereavement) may not conform to the norm, and may include or consist entirely of deep pooling. This is fine – but the Team should gently restore the scaffolding of the meeting structure after a few meetings.

The team could offer the bereaved the possibility of attending for part of the meeting, such as the meal, and then leaving. (or coming for the second part only).

The bereaved may stay in the Team, or decide not to come, or decide after a period of six months or a year to stop coming. None of these reactions is a criticism of the Team. The important issue is that the Team have ensured that the bereaved is welcome to continue in the Team as long as they wish.

Many of the Teams endeavours can be carried out by oneself. But the sit-down is one endeavour which appears to require a couple. However, if it is considered as a sit-down with our Lord, a practice which some Teams chaplains adopt, then it can once again become a powerful endeavour.

On-going Support after bereavement

Offers of help are welcome, perhaps put subtly, such as a lift to the meeting, cooking – generally, but especially if the bereaved is hosting a team meeting. Check with the bereaved person what they would find helpful, rather than assume.

One Team asked the bereaved if they could visit the grave, and then took the bereaved, and said some words each, and ended with a prayer and hymn.

It may be appropriate in some cases to encourage the bereaved to see an independent counsellor.

The bereaved, with the Team, might like to attend one of the memorial services run by the church, charities or hospitals in November or around Christmas (known to be organised in GB and Ireland.). Such services usually include the opportunity to light a candle, or place a prayer tag on a tree, in memory of a loved one.

There may be scope for professional support perhaps supplied from expertise in the wider movement, such as a solicitor, financial counsellor, priest or psychologist? Could there be a register of talents at sector or regional level?

Do not pussyfoot around when speaking to the bereaved – this anxiety is noticeable.

Outside the Meeting, the Team can keep in touch and offer to take a single member to activities of the wider Movement.

At some stage someone is likely to say something tactless. The bereaved expect this, and can be less embarrassed than those who make the mistake. But remember that it is kinder to mention the name of the deceased rather than avoid any mention.

Special sensitivity is needed over times of anniversary, birthdays, Christmas and special feasts.

Divorce

The grieving process is not supported in the same way as in the case of a death, since divorcees do not receive flowers, letters or cards, and usually no one drops in with a casserole or offers practical help even though a divorce is considered to be the second most painful experience after a death in the family. Friends do not want to take sides so in reality each member of a separated couple is often avoided to save an uncomfortable situation.

There can be a feeling of exclusion from the parish for divorcees, because they feel that they are not welcome. This can extend to reading at church, receiving communion etc. Therefore the Team community becomes more important as a source of support and respect.

Team sensitivity

A team should always be alert for signs of problems with, or within couples, and be prepared to support or initiate pooling.

Support when death is expected

Guidance can be found in the Practical Guide issued by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales (Ref 2). Team members should be available to support, but not as a large and overwhelming group. Provide and offer support, but allow the surviving partner time to be with the dying as much as possible. (This may apply to potential separation of one of the Teams couples too.)

A personal prayer for a healthy death.

Lord give me the Grace of Holiness, Health and Happiness here on earth for many years to come and the Grace of a Holy, Happy and Healthy death having been a burden to no one. Amen. (Elizabeth O'Hegarty)