

Part B) The Five Stages of Grieving

There are five primary stages of grieving that are typically recognized by professionals worldwide. They are disbelief, yearning, anger, depression and acceptance.

Why is it important to know the five stages of grieving?

- 1) It can help prevent someone from being swallowed up in depression.
- 2) It can allow us to better serve others whom are grieving.
- 3) It can prepare us to design more effective means in dealing with grief.

The Five Stages of Grief

1) Disbelief

You have noticed that early on when a loved one passes, people tend to say things like, "I just saw him the other day" or "We just talked on the phone." These are statements of disbelief and become obvious to the outside observer. When someone we love passes on, we simply cannot initially accept it because it is so alien to our thought process.

2) Yearning

The yearning is a deep longing to have the person back in their life. It can start at that first moment when the loved one's pattern is noticeably broken. Perhaps he or she always ate supper in the evening or came home at a certain time, but now they are not there. This absence causes the heart to grow fonder, but it is a thirst that will not be quenched.

3) Anger

Naturally anger would be the next coping mechanism to be put forth. It could be anger at oneself for not being there in the hour of need. Perhaps there was a guilty party in a wrongful death. Often to those weak or lacking in faith there is the attack against the holy name of God. It can even be anger directed at the one whom is dead.

4) Depression

When the person has passed through disbelief to reality, from yearning to confirmed absence and anger too which there was no justification, depression is sure to follow. The human mind is both strong and fragile. Emotions can cripple the thought process and a mental implosion ensues. This is a crucial phase, for any prolonging here can only lead to a worsening of the mental state.

5) Acceptance

This is the point of acquiescence, a submission to the facts of reality. It is here that true healing is underway and resolve is in place. Though the death of the loved one can still hurt and cause lapses of tears and pain, they are only moments and not the defining character of the individual. They will survive and have true strength in weakness.

Yale Bereavement Study (February 22, 2007)

This was a three year study examining 233 individuals that had suffered the death of a family member. The study went on to say the following:

- If a person has not moved through the first four stages in six months, he or she may need professional help dealing with the bereavement.
- Disbelief reached a peak one month after the loss, and then declined.

- Yearning steadily increased and reached its high point at four months before declining.
- Anger rises to a peak at five months, and depression peaks at six months.
- Acceptance is strongly present even from the first but becomes ever more dominant as time passes.
- The Yale study found that survivors tend to be better able to deal with their grief when the loved one had been diagnosed with a terminal illness more than six months before death. This is because the death was anticipated and the stages of grief have already been entered into and absorbed.
- People also have a harder time dealing with grief when a loved one dies unexpectedly, such as in an accident, the authors of the Yale study said. In those cases there was not any preparation in regards to the grief pattern.
- Ten to 15 percent of the bereaved survivors in the study experienced prolonged grief for more than six months. This is believed to be so because they tended to have a dependent relationship or that the person made them feel safe and protected.
- They also concluded that people suffering from prolonged grief may have trouble working and may be at risk for other problems, such as high blood pressure, suicidal thoughts and excessive drinking and smoking. The death of a loved one can actually lead to the death of the survivor.

The Five Steps of Grieving

David and the Death of Jonathan

2 Samuel 1:1-27 Now it came about after the death of Saul, when David had returned from the slaughter of the Amalekites, that David remained two days in Ziklag. ² On the third day, behold, a man came out of the camp from Saul, with his clothes torn and dust on his head. And it came about when he came to David that he fell to the ground and prostrated himself. ³ Then David said to him, “From where do you come?” And he said to him, “I have escaped from the camp of Israel.” ⁴ David said to him, “How did things go? Please tell me.”

- This is the first sight of disbelief, for David, being a great man of war, knows that the battle with the Philistines did not go well. He is eager to find out otherwise. “Surely they survived it!”
- This is how the disbelief process works, for it flies in the face of hard factual information. We know what the facts say, but listen to what our heart wants to hear.

And he said, “The people have fled from the battle, and also many of the people have fallen and are dead; and Saul and Jonathan his son are dead also.” ⁵ So David said to the young man who told him, “How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?”

- It is here that we see the next appearance of the stage of disbelief, for he called for a reconfirmation of what he already expected. How do you know for sure? “Please don’t confirm it for me, because I do not want this person to be dead.

⁶ The young man who told him said, “By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and behold Saul was leaning on his spear. And behold, the chariots and the horsemen pursued him closely. ⁷ “When he looked behind him, he saw me and called to me. And I said, ‘Here I am.’ ⁸ “He said to me, ‘Who are you?’ And I answered him, ‘I am an Amalekite.’ ⁹ “Then he said to me, ‘Please

stand beside me and kill me, for agony has seized me because my life still lingers in me.’¹⁰ “So I stood beside him and killed him, because I knew that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the crown which *was* on his head and the bracelet which *was* on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord.”¹¹ Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and *so* also *did* all the men who *were* with him.¹² They mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan and for the people of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

- Let the yearning process begin, for death is confirmed and accepted. This is why they are responding with sackcloth, ashes, fasting and mourning. No longer would David be able to have a personal relationship with Jonathan, for he was dead and there was nothing to restore that. His actions declare a deep yearning for his friend.

¹³ David said to the young man who told him, “Where are you from?” And he answered, “I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite.”¹⁴ Then David said to him, “How is it you were not afraid to stretch out your hand to destroy the LORD’S anointed?”¹⁵ And David called one of the young men and said, “Go, cut him down.” So he struck him and he died.¹⁶ David said to him, “Your blood is on your head, for your mouth has testified against you, saying, ‘I have killed the LORD’S anointed.’”

- We also are introduced to a bit of the anger stage of grief. “Someone is going to pay for this death of the house of Saul and it happened to be on the Amalekite.” This is a deep anger that resulted in the execution of a man. This certainly looks like an anger stage of grief.

¹⁷ Then David chanted with this lament over Saul and Jonathan his son,¹⁸ and he told *them* to teach the sons of Judah *the song of* the bow; behold, it is written in the book of Jashar.¹⁹ “Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How have the mighty fallen!²⁰ “Tell *it* not in Gath, Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, Or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, The daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.²¹ “O mountains of Gilboa, Let not dew or rain be on you, nor fields of offerings; For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil.²² “From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, The bow of Jonathan did not turn back, And the sword of Saul did not return empty.²³ “Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life, And in their death they were not parted; They were swifter than eagles, They were stronger than lions.²⁴ “O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, Who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, Who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.²⁵ “How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan is slain on your high places.²⁶ “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; You have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful Than the love of women.²⁷ “How have the mighty fallen, And the weapons of war perished!”

- It is in the lamentation for Jonathan that we find not only the depression stage, but also the acceptance stage.
- The Depression Stage: There is the dwelling of depression through the repeating and reliving the tragedy. Multiple times the “mighty have fallen”. Many times they are called to weep and mourn.

- The Accepting Stage: There is also the acceptance of the outcome, for they fought brilliantly and with honor. Words such as “Love”, “Pleasant”, “Swift” and “Strong” are permanently etched in the mind of Davis concerning them. They left the world a better place than when they found it. David was left with mention of a deep brotherly love for Jonathan. This is the accepting stage at its best.

We must understand that the five stages of grief are real and applicable to our everyday lives. This is how God designed it for us, for it is human to pass through this pattern. He also designed for us to not pass through these stages of grief alone and without the support of a loving church family. Think about this as you struggle with your grief.

Closing Story

Jennifer was a young stay-at-home mother with a two year old and a newborn to care after. She was a good mom, being attentive to her children’s needs and making the sacrifices that made a difference. She was also a “multi-tasker”, a valuable asset to the home. One day while cleaning the kitchen with a bucket and mop, the baby began to cry as the phone started to ring. Within a moment, the baby was on her left hip and the phone up to the right side of her head. She was planning an afternoon get together with another mom from the neighborhood. As she was jotting a note on a piece of paper, she heard a small splash and turned to see what it was. She was horrified to find her two year old son, Michael, buried head first in the cleaning bucket, thrashing his little legs and trying to gain upright. Apparently he had tried to stick his hand in the cleaning water when mom had turned her back just for a couple minutes.

She immediately set her infant down, screaming for fear and hoping for the best. She pulled his convulsing body from the bucket and found that he was not breathing. She immediately called 911 and tried to revive him. By the time the paramedics arrived, she could see it was too late. Inhaling the chemicals from the bucket had sentenced that little boy to a quick death. He was pronounced dead at the hospital an hour and half later. By that time Jim, the husband and father, arrived at the hospital just in time to hear the pronouncement of death. What started out as a happy family of four at the beginning of the day had ended in complete tragedy?

Jennifer and Jim cried in each other’s arms as the coroner took the body. Their baby was gone. By the time they reached home, many family and friends were already waiting to comfort and assist. All their hearts were broken, but none above parents. They exhibited early stages of disbelief by repeatedly saying things like “He was just here!”, “This must be some sort of nightmare!” and “I cannot believe this is happening to us!”

All they could do was weep as their loved ones shared their grief and sorrow. The pain was too much to bear. It was amazing thought that they were even able to have an hour’s worth of rest that night, if you call it “rest”. The first night was filled with countless visits to the toddler’s room for nurturing that would not occur. This went on for days, weeks and months. Sometimes they actually thought they could hear the baby in the night, but would find out that it was only phantom cries from a child that they longed for. Jim used to tuck in young Michael with a prayer at night, but that was now gone. He missed this so much. Just the sight of his little car seat in the back of the SUV brought great tears to their eyes. They were going through the deep yearning stage.

Through all this were the moments of anger. They had anger with each other, anger with themselves, anger toward the friend that called on the phone that day, anger with the paramedics “slowness”. Most of all there was anger with God. How could He let this happen to their little boy? They had done all the right things, yet little Michael was gone.

With all this going on it was not surprising to find that many periods of depression would come and go. Sometimes Jennifer would lay in bed during her days off, just staring at the stucco on the ceiling and think. At one point the depression became so great that she went on some medication to help her collect her composure.

Through many weeks of therapy with a counselor, fellowship with a church family and meditation unto God, they were finally able to begin somewhat of a normal life. There were times that they would slip back into the cycle, but by having a good plan of action they were able to finally gain acceptance with their grief.