

Grief

When we think of grief, we often think only of death, but other losses bring on almost identical reactions. People going through a divorce experience grief; so do people who have lost their health. Grief is also common to the aging person. A man in his middle sixties facing mandatory retirement may show grief reactions. People who have lost a child through marriage and now find the house empty may experience grief.

Ten Stages of Grief

Ten stages of grief are commonly seen by doctors, ministers, and others who deal with the problem. Everyone goes through some or all of these stages whenever he loses anything or anyone very important to him. In other words, what we are really talking about is *good* grief, normal grief, not abnormal grief. This healthy kind of grief, if not carried to extremes, can help a person move through an important loss with minimum harm to himself, either physical or mental.

The first stage of grief is shock. The person is, in a sense, temporarily anesthetized against the overwhelming experience he is facing. This state of shock is helpful to him because he does not have to comprehend all at once the magnitude of his loss.

The second stage of grief is emotional release. This comes about the time it begins to dawn on the person how dreadful his loss is. In this stage, clergymen are often faced with a particular kind of problem. Many people appear to have the impression that a person who has a mature religious faith should not grieve. When people are asked about this, they say, "Well the Bible says 'sorrow not'". They forget that the verse goes on to say, "sorrow not, even as others who have no hope". This is quite a different thing. They have confused, a stoic, attitude toward life with religious faith. The clergyman has to encourage his people to realize that emotional release is normal and natural - that there are times when we must all give vent to our feelings

The third stage is the stage of utter depression, loneliness, and a sense of isolation. The person feels that there is no help for him. He is down in the depths of despair; nothing could be so awful as his depression. This too is a normal kind of experience. Many people like to consider themselves being attuned to another's needs. This stage of grief is a time when they should show their concern. We have not begun to use the many volunteers within our churches who would be willing to visit with grieving people.

The fourth stage of grief brings physical symptoms of distress. The percentage of people who come to doctors' offices because of symptoms closely related to a great loss is very high. For example, a man of 45 has been working for 15 years for a small company, expecting to take it over when the owner retired. He had worked diligently, including evenings, Sundays, and holidays at no extra pay, to be ready for this new responsibility. But when the elderly owner retired, his nephew was brought in to take over the job. The disappointed man soon entered a hospital as a patient with physical evidences of illness. Many people are in the hospital because of some loss so great that they have not been able to face it. People can be helped through this stage most effectively by being helped to understand the grief process.

The fifth stage of grief begins when people become panicky. They become convinced that there is something wrong with them as persons. They begin to feel that because they can concentrate on nothing except their loss, they must be losing their minds. For this reason it has been suggested that clergymen ought to preach a sermon about once a year on the handling of grief, so that people may know in advance that such panic is normal, natural - that this is *good grief*. They must know that they can expect this to happen to them whenever they lose anything or anyone who is important to them. Then, when they begin to think that this is unique, they can recall what their pastor said and their panic need not be so great.

At the sixth stage the person begins to feel guilty about everything related to his loss. We have heard much about neurotic guilt in recent years. Now we are hearing more about real guilt. Some clergymen have been guilty of glossing over guilt. They have been tempted to encourage their people, to reassure them, and to say "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow". But no clergyman should say this before he gives the person a chance to admit his sorrow and his repentance for his guilt. When guilt is real, it must be dealt with.

It is often helpful to seek the advice of a clergyman, and to lay all the facts before him. Some churches do this through a formal confessional; virtually all encourage the idea on a voluntary basis. Not until he has unburdened himself of his guilt, is it possible to give the individual the aid he needs.

Grief's seventh stage is one of hostility. Now the person is beginning to feel a little better. He is beginning to come out of his depression and to express himself. He is hostile toward people he thinks may have contributed to the problem he now faces. This may include his doctor or his nurses, as well as people he feels responsible for his loss. Hostility is normal, too. While we should not encourage a person to be as hostile as he can, we must recognize that it is the nature of man. What the hostile man is really saying is, "They can't do this to me. Why did this have to happen to me? What have I done, more than others, to deserve this?" This is a natural hostility and has to be dealt with.

At stage eight the person seems unable to return to his usual activities. No matter how much he tries to get back to normal, he cannot quite do it - something seems to stop him. One of the causes of this may be related somewhat to our American culture and the way in which we handle grief. We make it difficult for people to grieve openly in America. Formerly, people wore black veils or a black armband, and everyone knew they were in mourning. We took this into account in the way we dealt with them. Today we offer our sympathy once after the funeral or after a great loss, and then we say, "Let's get back to business as usual." So the person has to carry his grief all by himself.

For example, a husband and wife were out riding with a widow of a year's duration and happened to go by a golf course where the man recalled a funny incident that happened in relation to the widow's husband. He was about to tell the story but thought, "No, I don't want to open this wound because Martha has been getting over it so well. I won't bring it up." We all tend to make this mistake.

How much better it would have been if he had spontaneously told the funny story and Martha would have laughed with him and enjoyed it very much. Had he said, "I'm sorry. I really shouldn't have told that," her reply in all probability would have been, "Shouldn't have told it? You don't know what a wonderful lift it gives me to know you still remember George. Nobody ever mentions him anymore!" In America we tend to make our friends suffer in silence and carry their burdens by themselves. It is essential that we seek to minister to the aging person who carries a sense of loneliness and isolation all by himself.

In stage nine we gradually begin to overcome our grief. One cannot predict when this is going to happen. It may come in a few months, or not for a year or two. But little by little, if the person is sustained and encouraged by those around him, proper emotional balance returns.

At the tenth (and last) stage, we readjust our lives to reality. The last stage is not "we are our old selves again". We are never our old selves after we have had a great grief experience. We are different from what we were before. But we believe that we can be stronger people and deeper people, and better able to help others because of what we have experienced.

Among people who go through earthshaking experiences of grief, those whose religious faith was mature and healthy to begin with have come through the experience better able to help others who face similar tragedies.

On the other hand, those who have an immature or childish faith tend to face loss in an unhealthy way. They usually never work through their grief, and so months, even years later they are still fighting battles within themselves which the spiritually mature person has been able to wrestle with effectively.

Obviously, people of mature faith do not suddenly acquire it when they need it. Like athletes who must stay in training, maturely religious people are always in training for whatever may come at anytime. When grief assails them, they are ready for it. It is just one of the many problems they have learned to wrestle with creatively.