

## **Divorce and Grief:**

### **Recognizing the Five Stages of Grief**

Going through a divorce can be like walking through a minefield of emotions. There is motivation to get from one painful stage to a better stage. Being familiar with the stages of grief, that are common to all grieving processes, including divorce, can help you and your family members make sense of bewildering emotions. Regardless of what events led to the divorce, there is a lengthy period of adjustment for all involved and no one way or correct approach to move through the different emotions.

When a family undergoes a separation, each family member experiences grief. This can include grief over the loss of the spousal relationship, as well as the expected (and perhaps idealized) family roles, and routines. In many cases, separating spouses also experience the loss of extended family relationships, shared friends, and other social supports.

The number of family members involved increases the family separation process. Each parent has their own grieving process, approach to problem solving, and style for resolving conflict. Each child has their own grief, expressed in a variety of ways depending on their age, stage of development, and personality.

In her well-known book On Death and Dying<sup>1</sup>, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief. These five stages included: Shock and Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Although these stages of grief describe reactions to a loss, they do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion. A person's experience with grief can cycle between these five stages, mirroring the "ups and downs" or the "push and pull" feelings associated with separation.

***The leaver and the leavee (the spouse left behind) —does it make any difference if you are the leaver or the leavee?***

In a marital separation, there is usually one spouse who initiates the change. This person is referred to as the leaver, or initiator. The other person is referred to as the leavee or responder. Whether or not the individual in a separation is the leaver or the leavee, both will experience grief. Each spouse's own grief will affect how they approach issues that need to be resolved, including those regarding their children and finances.

**The Shock and Denial Stage:** The initiator of a separation has likely weighed the pros and cons of a separation for some time before initiating the separation. As a result, he or she will have already processed some of his or her feelings about separating, and therefore will experience less shock and denial than the other spouse. The leaver may, however, experience shock and denial later on, when responding to the leavee's unexpected viewpoints or in relation to the leavee's expectations or requests.

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<sup>1</sup> Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. New York: Scribner.

Usually it is the leaver that experiences more shock and denial upon finding out that his or her partner wants to separate. He or she may not have anticipated the separation—or may not even have realized the other spouse was unhappy in the relationship.

**When faced with feelings of shock and denial, it is very difficult for people to process information and make decisions.** It is important for each partner to work through their feelings and reactions to the idea of separating, before they can consider making decisions about a change in their family and life circumstances. This takes time. **If decisions are rushed during this phase, they will not have been fully contemplated.** For example, a person in denial about the separation may go along with a spouse's settlement proposals in the hope that the spouse will have a change of mind about the separation. When, over time it becomes evident that the initiator's proposal is not realistic, or the responder realizes that the relationship is not salvageable, feelings of anger and greater conflict can sabotage the agreement and be a big setback.

**The Anger Stage:** Both the initiator and responder are vulnerable to feelings of anger. During this phase of grief, anger expressed towards each other can disguise feelings of fear, hurt, humiliation, loss, and abandonment. There is often a "flight or fight" reaction, such as shutting down or wanting to get back at the other person. Decision making during this phase can be difficult, as partners can be very reactive, and communication can be more conflictual. With assistance, (through a Divorce Coach, Counselor, or other supports), both the initiator and responder can harness this anger to re-focus on their individual needs and wishes. Both spouses can learn to refocus their anger at the spouse or situation. For example, anger at a spouse over a difficult financial situation can be directed into learning how to better control one's finances.

**The Bargaining Stage:** This stage often includes much confusion and mixed emotions. Making decisions in this stage is difficult, because the parties alternate between trying to meet their practical wants and needs with satisfying their emotional needs. Both parties may be vulnerable to making decisions based on reducing their emotional and psychological pain, rather than intellectually working through family decisions such as child support, parenting routines and schedules. For example, the initiator may be willing to accept less child support in order to reduce feelings of guilt over ending the relationship, or in an effort to speed up a final settlement. The responder may make unrealistic promises in an attempt to win the other person back.

**The Depression Stage:** This sets in once the parties really start to understand and feel the weight of their loss, and begin to accept that denial, fighting, or bargaining have not led to a reconciliation. Depression can be both in reaction (e.g., to the loss of relationship), as well as in anticipation of future events (e.g., imagining spending time apart from one's children in a shared parenting arrangement).

As is similar with the "shock and denial" stage, the initiator has had more time to process feelings of sadness and loss. By initiating the separation, the initiator may also have an advantage of feeling in greater control over the process. He or she may be more eager to finalize the separation, and may need patience to wait for the responder to be in an appropriate frame of mind to make final decisions.

The responder, however, may be more prone to low mood, fatigue, distraction and irritability, or other physical symptoms (poor sleep, aches and pains etc.) associated with depression. Symptoms of depression diminish a person's ability to make good decisions

and agreements, as they have to work through their emotions before they are fully ready to accept the end of their relationship. It is, however, a time when the pain necessitates greater depth of understanding about oneself and what they would like their future, and that of their family, to be like.

**The Acceptance Stage:** When both parties have emotionally and intellectually accepted the marital separation, they can move on to the final stage of grief — acceptance. Decision making during this phase is much more successful, because the emotional baggage involved with coming to terms with the dissolution of their marriage can be checked at the door. It will be easier for both the initiator and the responder to see “the big picture”, see options instead of positions, take their partner’s perspective, and ultimately to see what decisions are best for themselves and their children.

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