



cheri@kreativnrg.com
c: 248.444.4030
w: 248.592-1203
www.kreativnrg.com

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IS LIFE THROWING YOU A CURVE BALL? WHY KNOWING ABOUT THE KUBLER-ROSS GRIEF CYCLE CAN HELP

by Cheri J. Najor, CSW, CPT

Are you one of the thousands of Americans who find themselves either being laid off or smack dab in the middle of the mortgage crisis that has gripped the nation's headlines for months? Could you be one of the 52% of married couples who are going through divorce? Are you dealing with the stress of caring for aging parents or simply facing your own unique blend of trials and challenges? If so, then learning about the natural and predictable emotional stages you're going to experience when life throws you a curve ball can help. By knowing what stage of the grief cycle you're in, you'll feel not only less stressed, but normal, making whatever change you're going through more manageable. When it comes to dealing with change, knowledge is power.

Elisabeth Kubler Ross was a doctor in Switzerland who railed against a cold and unfeeling attitude toward people who were terminally ill. She spent a lot of time with dying people, both comforting and studying them. In her seminal book called 'On Death and Dying', she wrote about the stages of grief. These stages are now widely respected and often referred to as The Grief Cycle.

In the latter years of Ross' career, it was noticed that this emotional cycle was not exclusive to the terminally ill, but also **other people who were affected by bad news, such as losing their jobs** or otherwise being negatively affected by change. The important factor is not that the change is good or bad, but that people *perceive* it as a significant negative event that needs to be overcome and conquered.

STAGE 1: SHOCK

What It Looks Like

The first reaction on hearing bad news is one of classic shock. This initially may appear as if there is no reaction at all to the news. You may nod and accept the news without appearing to be troubled by it. Inside, however, you may have frozen out the news because it hasn't taken hold yet. To get the news through, you may need to hear it again and again.

This is followed by a more external shock, where there may be physical reactions such as paling of the skin, shortness of breath, vomiting, nausea and physical freezing.



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STAGE 2: DENIAL

What It Looks Like

After the initial shock has worn off, the next stage is usually one of classic denial where you may pretend that the news has not been given. You effectively close your eyes to any evidence of your new reality and pretend that nothing has happened. This is the stage where you may unconsciously decide not to talk about the “pink elephant in the middle of the room.”

When you’re in the thick of denial, you may continue your life as if nothing has happened. In the workplace, you’ll carry on doing your job even if that job is no longer required. If you’re facing a health crisis, a classic behavior here is a ‘flight into health’, where previously-perceived problems are suddenly seen as having miraculously fixed themselves. The motto for this stage is, “everything’s fine.”

STAGE 3: ANGER

What It Looks Like

This stage is easy to identify due to the sudden swing into anger that often occurs. You may feel an explosion of emotion, where the bottled-up feelings of the previous stages are experienced in a huge outpouring of grief. Whoever is in the way of this onslaught can very likely be blamed. (This may be where the phrase, “Don’t Kill the Messenger” may have been coined.) In a company this includes the managers, peers, shareholders, customers and suppliers. The phrase ‘Why me?’ may be repeated in an endless loop in your head. It’s natural to feel victimized in this stage and wonder why these things keep happening to you.

STAGE 4: BARGAINING

What It Looks Like

After the fires of anger have been ebbed, the next stage is a desperate round of bargaining, seeking ways to avoid having the bad thing happen. Bargaining is thus a vain expression of hope that the bad news is reversible.

Bargaining in illness includes seeking alternative therapies and experimental drugs. In organizations, it includes offering to work for less money or offering to do alternative work or be demoted down the hierarchy. One's loyalties, debts and dependants may be paraded as evidence of the essentiality of being saved. In relationships, you may find yourself pleading with your partner not to leave, promising to do anything to keep the relationship from ending.



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STAGE 5: DEPRESSION

What It Looks Like

After denial, anger and bargaining, the inevitability of the news eventually sinks in. You now find yourself reluctantly accepting the fact that it – whatever “it” is, is going to happen. At this stage, you naturally feel depressed.

In this emotional state, you can't see the big picture. You may only be able to see the worst-case scenario. In turning inward, you essentially turn away from any solution and any help that others are trying to offer you. The very help you need at this stage you inadvertently push away.

Depression can be manifested in a number of passive behaviors. In the workplace, this includes physical absenteeism, long lunch breaks and mediocre work performance. It can also look like a breakdown, where tears and sadness are your main focus and for a time, become the center of your world.

STAGE 6: TESTING

What It Looks Like

In this stage, even the darkest despair begins to lift and you slowly begin to work your way out of what has felt like a deep, dark hole. You may find yourself beginning to look for realistic things that you can do. As this new activity starts to work and you begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel, you realize that you have begun the climb out of your depression and are ready to take the steps that are necessary to reclaim your life.

This stage is often managed with the support of friends, family and professionals who specialize in helping people in whatever situation this is. In medicine, hospices help the terminally ill face their short futures with courage. In organizations, counselors and outplacement consultants help individuals move on to other work. In life, friends rally, the conversations flow, and future plans to deal with the change are beginning to take shape.



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STAGE 7: ACCEPTANCE

What It Looks Like

Acceptance is the stage where you are no longer arguing with, bargaining with or resisting “what is.” It is the stage where you are ready to own the situation and begin doing things that bring about positive results. You’ll know you are in this stage because for the first time, you feel as if you “have your life back.” You’ll feel increasingly happier and more content as you move your life forward.

This final stage is one where you’ve moved back to a place of stability, where you are ready and actively involved in moving on to the next phase of your life, no matter how short. The terminally ill person will put their life in order, sorting out wills and helping others to accept the inevitability that they now have faced.

If you’ve lost your job, you’ll actively seeking new work and may even look forward to a brighter, more prosperous career and future. If you’re newly single, you may join a dating service, ask friends to set you up on blind dates or simply decide that for now, being without a partner is a great opportunity to just be with your favorite person — you.

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Cheri J. Najor, CSW, CPT is a Michigan-based corporate trainer, professional speaker, licensed therapist and owner and founder of Kreativ Energy, a training and consulting company that specializes in helping people and organizations thrive during challenging and changing times. For over 20 years, her professional and personal growth services have helped thousands Just Say Yes!™ to a powerful mindset that enables them to become better leaders, create healthier relationships, and achieve extraordinary results. Cheri can be reached at: cheri@kreativnrg.com, or Cheri@LittleMissPositive.com; Office: 1-248-592-1203, or visit her website at <http://www.kreativnrg.com>

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