

MANAGING GRIEF

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matthew 5:4

We missionaries are a grieving people! We often find ourselves in situations of loss, where grief is the normal response. Much of what we call “burnout” among missionaries may be the accumulation of unresolved grief. Being able to grieve well is critical to survival and joy in hard times.

The focus of this article is understanding grief, not only for managing our own grief well, but to enable us to help others manage it well.

Grieving takes time. We normally underestimate the amount of time and work it takes to resolve grief issues.

God cares about grief. There are at least 175 Scripture references to grief and mourning! These demonstrate a great variety of causes of grief. They indicate that all three persons of the Godhead grieve, and that it is a natural response in us.

The Grief Process

People often only associate grief with death, but it is not just limited to death. Any significant loss can bring about grief and needs appropriate grief work. Losses can be primary or secondary. Primary losses include death, illness, evacuation, trauma or major changes. Secondary losses accompany primary loss. These include things like loss of control, reputation, security, esteem or a dream.

There is a normal cycle that people go through as they grieve a loss. People don't necessarily go through the process in this order. Different people go through these at different rates. There is no set time for each stage. There may be a tendency to skip stages.

The components of the grief cycle can be clustered into four stages:

- 1. The initial impact.**
- 2. Wrestling with the pain.**
- 3. Directly facing the pain.**
- 4. New life.**

Each stage is necessary to some degree in order to walk through grief. However, we may not need to experience every component of each stage. Many people attempt to go directly from Stage One to Stage Four, because they do not want to feel or experience the pain.

Also, many people trying to help a person through grief will try to get a person to go directly from Stage One to Stage Four. Some examples of the kinds of things people say to accomplish this are, “Everything will be all right.” “It’s time to move on now.” “There are other relationships out there.”

It is critical to allow yourself and others to work through each stage of grief. If a stage is skipped, the person will probably end up back there eventually, and it will take longer to move through the grief.

Let's look at each stage of grief, and what some possible components of that stage looks like.

Stage 1: Initial Impact.

These are the first normal responses people have when they experience a significant loss.

1. **Shock.** The loss is sometimes so overwhelming that people's emotional systems shut down. The pain is too great to tolerate. Shock is an attempt to buy time until the full impact can be absorbed.
2. **Numbness.** People may stare off into space, seem to have no emotion or appear to not care, but this is not the case.
3. **Denial.** This is another way to distance oneself from the pain until it can be handled. People will say things like, "No, this can't be true." There must be some mistake." Christians who appear to be handling their loss well may be experiencing shock, numbness or denial
4. **Emotional Outbursts.** Some people may have a very strong reaction, manifested by screaming or sobbing, with a lot of physical energy expended. It is a protest to what has happened.

Stage 2: Wrestling With the Pain.

In this stage, grieving people begin to feel the full impact of the pain, but do not want to accept it. They are still trying to avoid the pain.

1. **Anger.** People commonly become angry with the perpetrator, the victim, or

something more global like a government or an ethnic group. They may be angry with God and/or with themselves. They may be angry at family and friends who just happen to be close by. People can become bitter and resentful if stuck here.

2. **Fear.** The fear may be specific to what has happened or it may be generalized to other people, objects and situations.
3. **Searching.** This is asking the question, "Why did this happen?" There may be some bargaining with God, for example, "If You restore (the loss), I'll serve You."
4. **Disorganization.** Here people are unfocused; they may experience poor concentration, memory problems, and/or confusion.

Stage 3: Directly Facing the Pain

At this stage the person is beginning to fully embrace the pain. This is where the person begins to do grief work even though they look worse. Depression is often actually a sign of improvement!

1. **Panic.** People may experience an intense sense of alarm to the point of terror.
2. **Guilt.** Guilt can be overwhelming at this stage. They may blame themselves for what they could have done differently, or for what they didn't do.
3. **Loneliness.** Strong feelings of loneliness engulf them. They may tell themselves, "No one understands." "I'm all alone in

- this.” “No one has ever gone through anything this terrible.”
4. **Isolation.** At this stage, people may withdraw from everything and everyone.
 5. **Depression.** People will have feelings of great sadness, worthlessness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem. They will be tearful, have low energy, and may even have suicidal thoughts. They can develop a clinical depression if they get stuck here. (It is only a clinical depression if a great number of symptoms persist every day for at least 2 weeks.)
 6. **Re-entry troubles.** Here people begin to step out and try new things or try to re-engage, but that feels awkward or different and they pull back.

Stage 4: New Life.

Grieving people will never return to the exact place they were before the loss. They are changed. Here the present and the future become more compelling than the past. They begin to embrace both the pain of their loss and some joy.

1. **New relationships, strengths, and patterns.** At this point they can begin to define what their new life will mean through new relationships, new strengths and new patterns.
2. **Hope.** The terrible sense of hopelessness fades into the background, and the future begins to look promising.
3. **Affirmation.** They feel a fresh sense of affirmation about who they are and what they can do in their life ahead.

4. **Helping Others.** Their sense of neediness turns into an awareness of others' needs. They are newly motivated and freshly equipped to reach out to others.

Some Ideas On Grieving Well from Job's Life.

Job's life provides the most compelling example of grief in the Bible, and we can learn much from him. Here are some of the ways he related to God in his extended time of great loss.

1. He worshiped and praised God.

“Then he fell to the ground in worship, and said..., ‘May the name of the Lord be praised.’” Job 1:20-21

2. He accepted loss and trouble from God.

... “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away...” Job 1:21

“‘Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?’ In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.” Job 2:10

3. He expressed his dismay and feelings of hopelessness to God.

“Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again...Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul... I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning...” Job 7:7-21. See the whole passage for a better picture of this.

4. He questioned God and poured out all his feelings to Him.

“I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul...Your hands shaped me and made me. Will You now turn and destroy me?...If I hold my head high, You stalk me like a lion and again display Your awesome power against me...” Job 10:1-22. See the whole passage.

Also see 12:21-25 and 14:1-22

5. He spoke to God about His goodness to him.

“You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in Your providence watched over my spirit.” Job 10:12

6. He acknowledged God’s mighty acts.

See Job 12:14-25

7. He remembered God’s attributes, including His...

- Righteousness (9:1)
- Greatness (9:4-10)
- Wisdom (9:4; 12:13)
- Power (9:4-10; 12:13)
- Kindness (10:12)
- Providence (10:12)
- Understanding (12:13)
- Strength (12:16)
- Victory (12:16)

8. He put his hope in God, no matter what would happen.

“Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him...” Job 13:15

9. He prayed for those who mistreated him during his grieving.

See Job 42:8-10.