

# Sanctuary Psychiatric Centers



of Santa Barbara



## Moving Beyond Grief and Loss

In our work as mental health professionals, we have seen many clients dealing with losses of all kinds—loss of loved ones through death and divorce, for instance. These experiences are difficult for everyone.

### **Stages of Recovery from Loss**

There are some predictable stages that most people pass through after losing something or someone important.

In her work on death and dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross outlined five stages of grieving.

**Shock and Denial:** The first reaction to loss is often the inability to feel anything. This may include feeling numb, weak, overwhelmed, anxious, not yourself, or withdrawn.

**Anger:** Blaming yourself or others for the loss.

**Bargaining:** “If you’ll just let him live, I’ll promise to go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life.”

**Depression:** Feeling deep sadness, disturbed sleep and eating patterns, thoughts of suicide, excessive Crying.

**Acceptance:** Beginning to look for the lessons of the experience.

Kübler-Ross said that the grieving process involves experiencing all five stages, although not always in this order. She also said that people often cycle back and forth through a number of the stages before coming to the stage of acceptance.

## Kinds of Losses

Some examples of significant losses are:

- Loss of a person through death
- Divorce
- Job loss
- Loss of your good health when you are diagnosed with a disease
- Loss of a body part through accident or surgery
- Loss of an ability, such as blindness
- Loss of a friend who has moved
- Loss of everything familiar when you move away

Each kind of loss affects each person in a different way, but the recovery process usually follows Kübler-Ross's five stages.

## Recovering from Loss: Some Key Points

1. **You are responsible for your own grief process.** No one can tell you how to grieve, and no one will do your grieving for you. It is hard work and you must manage the process by yourself.
2. **The grief process has a purpose.** It is to help you learn to accept the reality of the loss and to learn from the experience.
3. **Remind yourself that your grief will end.** You will not feel like this forever. You will heal.
4. **Take care of your health.** Grief is extremely stressful, and it requires energy to manage the stress.
5. **Be careful with food and drink.** While it may be tempting to numb the pain with food and drink, this can lead to the additional problems of alcohol dependence and overweight. Also, numbing the pain means you are prolonging denial. This will make your grieving process longer.
6. **Talk about the person** who is no longer in your life. People sometimes avoid talking about the loss as a denial mechanism. However, this prolongs denial and the grieving process.
7. **Take time to be alone.** In the days and weeks following the loss of a loved one, there is often a flurry of activity with many visitors and phone calls. Added to the stress of your loss, this can be completely exhausting. People will understand if you don't answer the phone for an afternoon or go to your room and close the door for a while.

Don't make any important decisions until your life feels more balanced. It can be tempting to make some important changes right after a major loss as an effort to feel more in control.

8. **Maintain a normal routine if you can.** You have enough changes in your life right now. Try to get up in the morning, go to bed at night, and take your meals at the same times you usually do.
9. **Ask for help.** You will need it. If you don't want to be alone, or if you want someone to take you somewhere, it is okay to ask. People don't expect you to be self-sufficient right now.

10. **Let people help you.** People want to help because it gives them a way to express their feelings. Staying connected with people is especially important now, and accepting help is a way of staying connected.
11. **Keep a journal of your feelings and experiences** during the grief process. Writing about your feelings helps you express them, rather than keeping them inside. It also gives you something to remember and review in the future, which you will appreciate.  
Writing about your feelings helps you express them, rather than keeping them inside.
12. **Avoid making extreme life changes** after a major loss. Don't make any important decisions until your life feels more balanced. It can be tempting to make some important changes right after a major loss as an effort to feel more in control. If you can, put off such changes and decisions until later.
13. **Don't hurry your grief process.** People sometimes want to put their feelings and memories behind them because they are painful. But grieving takes time, and there are no shortcuts.
14. **Remind yourself** that although grief hurts, it will not harm you. Grief is painful, but you will survive and even grow from the experience.
15. **Expect to regress** in your recovery process from time to time. This is normal. It may happen unexpectedly, but it probably won't last long.
16. **Acknowledge the anniversary** of your loss by taking the day off or doing something special. Have supportive people ready to be with you. It could be a difficult day and it's better not to be alone.

### **How to Help Someone Who Is Grieving**

1. Don't try to get them to feel or be anything but what they are.
2. Don't reward them for acting cheerful or "like your old self." This teaches them to suppress their feelings around you.
3. Don't avoid them. They need your support.
4. Let them tell about the loss again and again, if they need to.
5. Recognize that unexpected, perhaps inappropriate behavior is part of the grieving process. It means the bereaved person is moving forward.

## **Suggested Reading**

Bob Deits, *Life After Loss*.

Tucson, AZ: Fisher Books, 1992.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. New York: MacMillan: 1969.