

Section 4

Stages of Loss

Five Stages of Loss	
Denial	Refusing to accept the truth of a situation; rejecting, disowning, disavowing or repudiating the truth.
Anger	Refusing to accept the truth of a situation; rejecting, disowning, disavowing or repudiating the truth.
Bargaining	Exchange or trade something for something else.
Depression	Pressed down is the Latin meaning, a feeling of sadness, inability to concentrate, dejection and guilt.
Acceptance	Receive understanding, belief and a willingness to act on information.

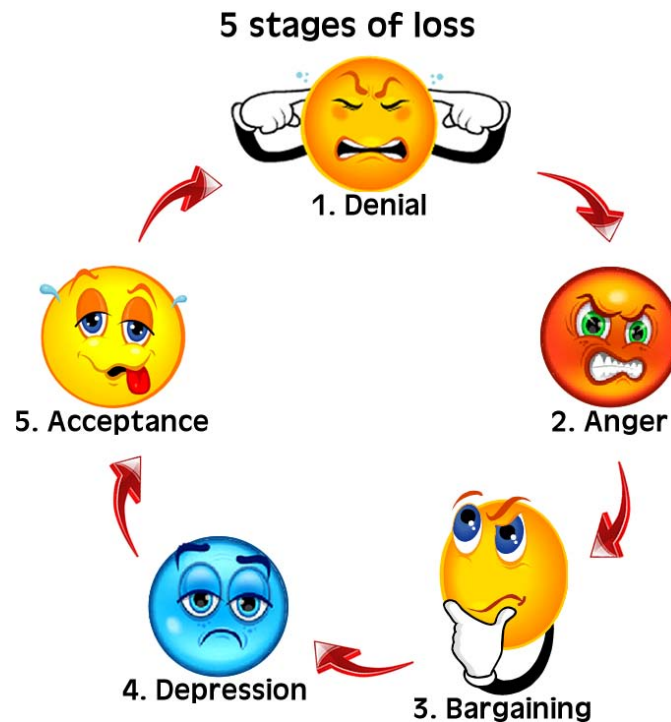
Loss is something we must all go through, not around. To sidestep or seek to get around the pain of loss is to stop the healing process. Experiencing and working through our painful emotions or feelings are an indispensable part of healing. Blocked feelings delay or interfere with healing.

The loss process is not subject to any timetable. Some people progress through the stages of loss rapidly, while others take a long time or may need assistance to get through.

Let's examine the five stages of loss. They are fluid because they move back and forth, up and down. Any person who experiences loss will have a sense of loneliness, despair, lack of worth, lack of energy and some type of depression.

You can suffer a loss whether it is an object or your health. I recently read where Kierkegaard, 100 years ago, said we may mourn or grieve about loss of health or possessions, but what we really lose most often is ourselves, our understanding and love of ourselves. This is a loss that we need to grieve also.

Let's talk about the five stages of loss. They are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.



An example for me involves my car keys. I have a notorious problem at home where I lose my car keys and then lose my temper.

If I lose my car keys, the first thing I will say is "I didn't lose them — I just misplaced them. They are in the bedroom, in the den, in my coat, or I forgot them in the car. They are somewhere else, but I didn't lose them." I am going to **deny** the fact that I lost them, and believe that they are just not immediately available and I will get them in just a minute.

After I look in all the locations in which I said they were and I don't find them, then I become **angry**. I get angry with everyone. This is the time in which you walk by someone and say, "Good morning," and they say, "What's good about it?" They are not angry with you. They are expressing frustration at something that's happened in their lives and you just happened to be present when the frustration was released. Thus, my anger is directed at anybody who walks by. Really the anger is at me, for my failure and for my loss. I feel guilty. I am angry, but I am going to put that anger somewhere else.

Remember the story about the Greek messengers, how when they came with bad news, the Greek monarchs would kill them? This is what we do nowadays, but we are more civilized. We don't kill with a gun or an arrow or a knife or a sword. We kill with psychology, with bad words, with yelling or raising our voices, with intimidation — that's how we harm today.

When I recognize that my anger has done nothing except offend and distance my loved ones from me, I begin to **bargain**. I begin to tell God, "You know, if I find those keys, I promise I won't lose them again." You do what Burt Reynolds did on his way back from the ocean. You tell God, "Boy, I'll go to church every day. I'll pray every day. I'll be really good. Just help me find my keys."

However, this doesn't work either. Pretty soon you are depressed and nothing is functioning. You may pray to Saint Anthony, the patron saint of lost things. What you are really doing when you are praying to Saint Anthony is being calm, contemplative; you are listening in your mind and doggone it, you will remember where you put those things. It comes to you. I am not sure that Saint Anthony is the guy who is really doing it, or if it is the fact he is sitting there saying, "Okay guys, just be calm, don't be angry, don't deny, be rational and think and the answer will be there." We all bargain. We bargain and usually it is unsuccessful.

When our bargaining is unsuccessful, we become **depressed**. When we are depressed, there is no action whatsoever. We sit, stare at the ground and do nothing. We can see no hope, no way out, no success.

Finally, somewhere, somehow with support, we move from depression to **acceptance**. Moving from depression to acceptance is a process that cannot be clicked on and off. It comes from having someone who is a helper, who listens to you, lets you say the crazy, wild, unreal things that you are feeling and accepts them, does not judge them, cherishes them and understands that this is your way of working your way out of your depression. Once you achieve acceptance, then you begin the task of solving the problem.

In the case of the keys, first I denied I lost them. Then I got mad at everybody because I did lose them. Then I prayed to Saint Anthony and he didn't help me find them. I got depressed and said, "Oh, I can't go to work. I can't make a living. I am going to starve to death." Finally I said, "All right, this is all foolish. I am going to make another set of keys. I am going to mark them. I will make a spare set and put them in a safe place. I will take this new set of keys and I will always hang them up in the same spot." Thus, I move on with my life.

When we have cancer or any illness, we have the same stages of loss. We go through those stages either rapidly or slowly, depending on our psychological background, age, intellectual background and our emotional and spiritual background. Remember that we can go all the way from denial to acceptance, and then fall back to denial or anger or bargaining or depression. The peaks and valleys are usually quite high at the beginning, but they begin to level off to a fairly straight line toward the end. This bouncing back and forth is difficult for many people, but our loved ones who feel for us and understand us will know we are in the process of progressing through the stages of loss.

It is also important to understand that in the stages of loss, different people will be at different stages at different times. The spouse may be in denial while the patient may be at anger. Or the spouse may be at acceptance and trying to do something and the patient is at denial. If you have one person at acceptance and one at denial, it is obviously clear that no effective communication can take place.

Often times, anger is where everyone gets stuck. When they come to see the cancer specialist, the anger comes flowing out as though the cancer specialist has caused the cancer. He did it, he made me sick. I can't stand this terrible guy. I am leaving. He doesn't know what's going on. I know what's going on.

These are the types of feelings people have when they have loss. They project this anger and denial toward other people as though those people are responsible. They don't want to keep it inside themselves. They want to give it to somebody else, so they throw it out. We need to be pretty good sponges to accept this. We have to be strong spiritual people and understand caregiving in order to accept this.

I recommend reading a book called "Good Grief" by Granger E. Westberg. Granger's book is very short, only about 64 pages long. It takes the stages of loss and divides them into 10 stages.

10 stages of good grief

- 1) Shock.
- 2) Expressing emotion.
- 3) Depression and loneliness.
- 4) Experiencing physical symptoms of distress.
- 5) Panic.

- 6) A sense of guilt about the loss.
- 7) Anger and resentment.
- 8) Resistance to returning.
- 9) Gradual return of hope.
- 10) Struggle to affirm our reality.

Granger has the stages in slightly different order and under different names, but essentially he has the same five stages of loss. He understands that you bounce back and forth. I highly recommend his book.

Sabrina Says:

We all experience the five stages of loss at different speeds, and we bounce back and forth through them. Recognize that:

- People in different stages cannot communicate well. Acknowledge the stage you're in as well as the other person's stage when trying to talk to them.
- It is important to be non-judgmental, to be accepting while people struggle through these stages of loss.
- Suffering through the stages is normal. What is abnormal is not having a partner, a family, a coach or a developed Support Map group who are accepting as you go through these stages and come out whole again.
- Some day, life **WILL** balance out. It **WILL** begin to make sense again.

