



Step Off the Stages: You're Doing Everything Right

After I lost my 22-year-old son to a tragic car accident, I was inundated with reading materials from well-meaning (and amazing) friends. Unfortunately, once I mustered the courage to open them and peer inside those pages, I realized I had little to no connection to any of the writings. One factor that contributed to this, I believe is that I self-identify as Agnostic. The moment I realized the books and pamphlets that had been so sweetly gifted to me, were not what *I* needed, I immediately began a search for what was right for me.

Now, be sure -- I recognize that finding something "right for me" was next to an impossible task, considering I'd lost my child: my youngest

child, my only son. It is tragic, and there are no words or brightly colored book jackets with hearts and trees that could ever fill my mind or heart with comfort or understanding. Yet, I searched. It's what I do. I search. I am a freelance researcher and copywriter, and I place a high value on data, science, and proven theories.

One theory that is thrown about often regarding grief is Kubler-Ross's 5 Stages of Grief. Since the 1969, when Ross first published her acclaimed book *On Death and Dying*, these stages have been universally prescribed and accepted to guide the grief-stricken after they have lost a loved one. As a refresher, the Five Stages are:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

At first glance, these all sound like reasonable stages. Unfortunately, most people don't know that Kubler-Ross created this theory after many years of working with terminally-ill patients, and in an attempt to assist them and their families through the grieving process -- grieving mortality and their imminent deaths. This theory is still widely accepted, but has been rejected, "debunked," and questioned as being applicable to folks who are grieving a deceased loved one. Well-respected and credible sources, such as *Psychology Today* and Harvard Medical School, suggest that these stages are too uniform, step-by-step, and precise, and that is simply not how grief works. And, I know first-hand.

Although these stages, in my mind, make perfect sense for the terminally ill. I sadly have experience with close family and friends who have passed on from an illness and some who are currently battling a terminal illness. Certainly, once diagnosed, denial sets in. Makes sense. Thoughts such as *this can't be happening, I can't believe this, and this is a mistake* run through the mind. Once the sad and scary truth is

solidified, you can imagine being pretty damn angry, right? So, Stage 2 makes sense: Anger. Once the anger has subsided a bit, your brain, your heart, your faith makes an attempt at another angle. Stage 3: *God, if you save my life (or the life of my loved one), I will do anything. I will stop drinking. I will stop cursing. I will go to church twice a week.* Bargaining. Again, this makes perfect sense. These stages seem to be fluid (from 1 to 5 and back again) and can go on for some time.

It's different with sudden loss. For example, I really don't think I ever denied that my son was dead. It was all too real. I am in no way minimizing the pain and turmoil that terminally ill patients and their families endure; what I am pointing out is that for **my** specific loss (and perhaps others who have lost a loved one suddenly), there was no time for second opinions. There was no room or opportunity for a new diagnosis. My son was gone. No two ways about it.

Fast forward to trying to find a way to navigate the grief associated with my son's death and to somehow keep my sanity, and this widely prescribed and respected "Five Stages" theory came to light for me again (I studied it back in the late 1980s when I was a Psychology student).

As a bereaved mother, my advice to the bereaved is to Step off the Stage(s) and be okay with the way you are grieving. Here's the long and short of it;

In time, after your loss (unless you think you might be experiencing [complicated grief](#) -- see below) you "should" be able to

- accept the reality of your loss
- allow yourself to honor and express your emotions
- adjust to a new reality without your loved one
- form new relationships.

Remember this: Grief can't be "fixed." Grief and loss vary from person-to-person. There is no timetable, no calendar, no finish-line for grief.

Be patient with yourself and give yourself permission to grieve. Make deliberate decisions about what you need (and don't need). Reach out for help and support. Honor your loved one and, at least, consider the possibility of future joy.

Sending you all SO MUCH LOVE,

Lisa! xo