



The 12 Stage Cycle of Grief Explained

Grief is a cycle, and it's a cycle we often revisit throughout our lives. It's not reserved for death or the end of life. We grieve many things: relationships, friendships, job changes, moving house, even losing a sentimental item. We might even grieve when we miss an appointment.

Grief is constant and cyclical. It happens at two levels:

- **Macro grief** – A deep, long-term grief, such as losing someone close. This is a lengthy process, not over when the funeral ends.
- **Micro grief** – A daily, moment-to-moment experience where we feel different aspects of grief, even within the same day.

Understanding the Cycle of Grief

Above, you should see an image of the **12-stage grief cycle**.

The first thing to notice is that it moves backwards, like a clock running in reverse. That's because grief can feel regressive—pulling us backward before forward

movement resumes. We begin with the event—the moment of loss, immediately followed by:

1: Shock

For most, the first response is shock, even expected losses such as moving, changing jobs or the passing of a terminally ill loved one, these still come with a level of shock. Shock is the body's natural response to unexpected events. Blood supply shifts, cutting off deep thinking, numbing emotions, and reducing appetite. The brain prepares for survival; you feel confused, vacant, unable to focus. Shock can last minutes, weeks, or even months. In extreme cases, it can trigger panic attacks that persist for a long time.

2: Denial

“It’s not happening.” “They’re not gone.” Denial is a common mental defense mechanism. Denial can be subtle, continuing routines as if nothing has changed, or denial can be extreme, where a person truly believes their loved one is still around. For example, I once worked with a man who had lost his wife two months earlier. He was completely convinced she still came home every evening. He believed she tidied the house, moved his cigarettes, and adjusted his belongings. Denial isn’t just a refusal to believe—it’s a way for the brain to process grief slowly, at a rate we can handle. Grief isn’t linear. You don’t move cleanly from Shock → Denial → Betrayal. Instead, we oscillate between emotions, sometimes experiencing multiple stages at once.

3: Betrayal

Betrayal is the feeling of being left behind; it often turns into anger:

- *“You shouldn’t have died. You should have taken better care of yourself.”*
- *“If you hadn’t smoked, you’d still be here.”*
- *“If the doctors had done more, this wouldn’t have happened.”*

We also feel betrayed by circumstances or even by ourselves:

- *“If I’d forced them to go to the doctor sooner, they wouldn’t have died.”*
- *“If I had been a better partner, they wouldn’t have left me.”*

Betrayal and anger *often* go hand in hand.

4: Sadness

Sadness in grief isn't just about crying, it's a deep, heavy melancholy. The world feels dull; colors seem faded; everything is harder. This stage also brings regret. You may feel sorry for yourself, or desperate to turn back time. This zone is often the emotional channel or "crib" (*nurse and rehearse*) of the grief cycle.

5: Guilt & Shame

Guilt is a major part of grief.

- *"I should have visited more."*
- *"I should have called them."*
- *"I should have made more time."*

We blame ourselves for what we could have done differently. Shame often follows guilt; it shrinks our world. We withdraw, stop socializing, and feel small. We avoid people because we feel undeserving of happiness. By this stage or time period, we are weeks or months into the grief cycle.

6: Identity Crisis (The Bottom of the Cycle)

"Who am I without them?" This is the lowest point. Loss has changed everything: Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, routines. Everything feels different at this stage or period of time, people often feel stuck. Without support, people can linger here much longer than they expect; moving forward can feel impossible.

7: Acceptance

Acceptance isn't about forgetting or moving on; it's the deeper realization that *they are gone, and I am still here*. You begin to adjust. Their presence moves from the present to the past.

8: Understanding

The slow process of *meaning-making* begins.

- *"At least we had time together."*
- *"At least they weren't in pain."*
- *"Maybe I will see them again one day."*

The shift from Identity Crisis to → Understanding is the hardest in the cycle. It's easy to stay stuck at rock bottom, convinced there's no way forward. Support from friends, family, or therapy is crucial here.

9: Forgiveness

Forgiveness is about letting go of blame:

- Forgiving yourself (*for what you should have done*).
- Forgiving them (*for leaving you*).
- Forgiving doctors, people, and circumstances that might have played a role.

Forgiveness releases the emotional weight of grief.

10: Healing

You begin to rebuild; joy starts to return, the heaviness lifts, and life feels possible again.

11: The New Normal

This is life after grief. You reach a sense of stability, clarity, and peace, but grief is never truly over. A new event can restart the cycle at any time. Loss is a part of life, and each experience reshapes us.

Final Thoughts

Grief is not a straight line. It moves backward before it moves forward. It isn't a checklist—you don't simply complete one stage and move on. Instead, you move back and forth, sometimes revisiting the same emotions multiple times. The goal is not to "finish" grief. The goal is to integrate it into life and find a way forward that honors both the loss and yourself.