

## Stages of Grief

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Crises are usually accompanied by the loss of someone or something important to a student or group of students. Educators need to understand children who are grieving and be prepared to support them during this challenging time.

The psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), developed a set of five stages commonly seen in the grieving process. The same five stages conceivably characterize students trying to come to grips with a loss (e.g., the death of a friend). Although individuals don't necessarily manifest the characteristics of each of these stages or progress from one stage to the next in the following sequence, some students' behaviors might be more understandable seen in this context.

The loss of a parent, relative, or close friend usually comes as a profoundly painful experience for children and adults. Grief, the intense emotion that follows a loss, may be experienced in stages. Realize that these stages serve only as a guide to the behaviors that can emerge and are often dependent on many factors, including the age of the person grieving, the available support system, previous experience with loss, and the individual's ability to understand and communicate emotions.

### Stage 1: Shock/Denial

Denial acts as a buffer. It gives the person time to regroup, take stock, and eventually mobilize other defenses. A person in the denial stage of grief finds it hard to believe or accept the death and may

- think, "This can't be happening."
- seem to have forgotten the death by acting unfeeling or clownlike.
- pretend that the loss has not occurred or that everything is "fine."
- have nightmares and report dreaming of the deceased.

### Stage 2: Anger

Anger allows the full force of emotions to be felt by the person.

It may be directed (e.g., by railing at the person who died), or diffused (e.g., by acting belligerent with anyone). A person experiencing the anger stage of grief may

- think, "I hate her for doing that," or "I hate him for dying!"
- direct anger outward by blaming others or turn the anger inward blame him/herself.
- provoke fights and display a hostile attitude.
- display antisocial behavior, including destruction of property.
- break rules and refuse to comply with a parent or teacher's wishes.

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help and support to work through the stages of grief. Anniversaries and holidays that serve as a reminder of the death may be difficult each year.

Children respond to grief in their own unique way. When someone they love dies, it is important to allow children to freely express their sorrow. They should be reassured repeatedly that they will be taken care of and not abandoned. Children also need to see the adults around them grieve and express emotions genuinely. Anger, denial, guilt, and fear are all normal parts of grief. Children need to work through these feelings. There is great value in adults showing appropriate self-disclosure.