

Quick Tips:

Understanding Death & Dying

When a person dies in our care, it is normal and natural to go through the stages of grieving for that person. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross first identified the stages of grieving, and many other since then have expanded on them to make them more understandable, and more complete.

Recognize that losses tend to compound on each other. If you have recently lost someone important to you, losing someone in your care soon after can cause you to feel all of your original feelings of loss and grief all over again. This is normal, but makes an individual loss seem much harder than if would have otherwise.

In your care giving, you might experience the stages of loss and grief like this:

1. **Denial.** Our first instinct is not to believe that this could have happened. Especially when the individual may have seemed relatively healthy, disbelief is natural.
2. **Anger.** You may experience some feeling of anger that the person in your care died, when perhaps other individuals seemed like they should have died first. You may even have thoughts that you wish another; more challenging person would have been the one to die. Again, these thoughts are normal, and don't mean that you're a bad person, or a bad caregiver. Recognize them as normal parts of the grieving process.
3. **Bargaining.** This feeling usually occurs before death, for example, when someone is dying, and you think, "If God just lets him/her live, I'll start going back to church." After a death, we don't have much to bargain for, so we usually go right on to the next stage.
4. **Depression.** This can be a simple sadness that we feel for a few days after the loss, or it can extend into a cloud of sadness that feels like it is pressing down on us day after day. Someone once said that sadness is like a cold: in a few days, with rest and care, we'll feel normal again. Depression, on the other hand, is like cancer: it can grow until it affects our ability to sleep, eat, work, or be with others. If you're feeling this level of sadness, get help. See your doctor, or talk to your spiritual advisor, or seek a qualified professional. Even losing someone in your care to death can cause depression – don't feel embarrassed or ashamed. You are a caregiver because you have the capacity to care deeply. That same capacity for caring will mean you also feel great sadness at the loss of an individual you care for.
5. **Acceptance.** Allow yourself time to grieve, and you will naturally move into a state of acceptance. We all know that death is a sure thing in this life, but it is hard to accept in the personal instances we experience death. Allowing yourself to experience the grieving process will allow you time to come to a state of acceptance. Remember, that person will live on in the memories he or she left behind in your heart. Celebrate the time you shared in that individual's life, and the gifts you were able to give that person in making his or her last days better – happier, safer, and more loved.