



# THE 5 STAGES OF GRIEF AFTER INFIDELITY

## WHAT ARE THE 5 STAGES OF GRIEF?

The five stages of grief, as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, provide a useful framework for understanding the emotional journey many people go through after infidelity. While these stages are commonly associated with grieving the loss of a loved one, they are also highly applicable to the emotional turmoil that follows betrayal trauma, such as infidelity.

## WHAT AM I GRIEVING?

Grief is often described as a process of letting go, but it's more about learning to accept and live with loss. You have lost your old relationship, it died at the moment of discovery. In order to move forward, reconciliation or not, you must grieve the loss.

## THE 5 STAGES

### STAGE 1: DENIAL

**What does it look like:** After discovering infidelity, people often enter a state of disbelief. They may struggle to accept that their partner has betrayed them, leading to thoughts like, "This can't be happening" or "There must be some mistake." Denial serves as a protective buffer, allowing the mind to process the reality of what has happened more slowly.

**Why it happens:** The pain of betrayal can be overwhelming, so denial acts as a way to avoid or delay feeling the full impact of that emotional hurt.

- Shock:** The initial discovery of infidelity often brings a sense of shock, which can leave a person feeling numb or detached from reality.
- Confusion:** People may struggle to process what happened, leading to a sense of bewilderment or disbelief.
- Disbelief:** Many feel the need to dismiss or minimize the infidelity, telling themselves it can't be true or rationalizing the behavior to delay the emotional impact.

## STAGE 2: ANGER

**What does it look like:** Once reality begins to set in, anger can surface. This might manifest as directed anger towards the unfaithful partner, the person they cheated with, or even oneself. Anger may arise from a sense of betrayal, injustice, and hurt.

**Why it happens:** Anger is often fueled by a feeling of loss of control and a sense of being wronged. It's a natural response to betrayal, providing a sense of empowerment in an otherwise vulnerable moment

- Betrayal:** A deep sense of being wronged is common, along with feelings of resentment and fury toward the unfaithful partner.
- Outrage:** This often includes intense frustration and indignation, and thoughts like, "How could they do this to me?"
- Blame:** The betrayed person may place blame on their partner, the third party, or even themselves as they try to make sense of the betrayal.

## STAGE 3: BARGAINING

**What does it look like:** In this stage, people may attempt to make deals or seek ways to reverse the situation. This might involve promises to change or seek help if the partner will stay and commit to making things work. Alternatively, the person may wonder if things could have turned out differently if they had done something differently.

**Why it happens:** Bargaining is an attempt to regain a sense of control and to hold onto the relationship despite the betrayal. People might believe that there's something they could do or could have done to prevent the infidelity or that they can repair the relationship through specific actions.

- Desperation:** There may be a longing to undo the betrayal, leading to thoughts of what could have been done differently.
- Guilt:** Many people question their own role or shortcomings in the relationship, wondering if they did something to "cause" the infidelity.

•**Hopefulness (for Reconciliation):** For some, bargaining is a time of tentative hope that the relationship can be saved if certain actions are taken.

## STAGE 4: DEPRESSION

**What does it look like:** The weight of what has happened can lead to sadness, despair, and hopelessness. Thoughts about the future may feel bleak, and people might withdraw from others or struggle with daily activities. There's a sense of mourning not only for the relationship that was but also for the trust and innocence that may feel lost.

**Why it happens:** Depression in this context is a natural reaction to loss. It involves grieving the relationship as it once was and acknowledging that it may never be the same, even if both partners work toward reconciliation.

- Sadness:** Profound sorrow and a feeling of loss often take hold as the reality of betrayal sinks in.
- Hopelessness:** Many people feel that their future is now uncertain or damaged, leading to a sense of emptiness.
- Isolation:** Depression can make people feel withdrawn and disconnected from others as they try to process the depth of their pain privately.

## STAGE 5: ACCEPTANCE

**What does it look like:** Over time, some people reach a place of acceptance, where they come to terms with the reality of the situation. Acceptance doesn't mean condoning the infidelity but rather acknowledging that it happened and finding a path forward—whether that's staying in the relationship or moving on independently.

**Why it happens:** Acceptance allows people to let go of what they cannot change and begin to focus on their healing and growth. It's the stage where rebuilding trust, setting boundaries, or choosing a new direction in life becomes possible.

- Understanding:** The betrayed partner may begin to make peace with what happened, recognizing it as a part of their experience without letting it control their life.
- Forgiveness or Letting Go:** This may involve forgiving oneself and/or the partner, even if only for the sake of personal healing rather than reconciliation.
- Empowerment and Growth:** Acceptance often brings a renewed sense of self-worth and confidence, as individuals begin to focus on their own future, either with or without their partner.

## MOVING THROUGH THE STAGES OF GRIEF

**The stages ARE NOT linear;** individuals may cycle back and forth between them. Some might skip certain stages or experience them in a different order.

Healing from infidelity is deeply personal and often complex, involving forgiveness, self-reflection, and should include individual therapy/coaching. It is helpful to also include marriage counseling to rebuild trust if both partners choose to stay together.

## NAVIGATING THE STAGES OF GRIEF

During each stage of the grief process following infidelity, people experience a range of intense and sometimes conflicting emotions.

Each of these emotional experiences is part of the journey toward healing and personal growth. For many, therapy/coaching, support groups, or talking with loved ones/close friends can help navigate these difficult emotions, especially in the most painful stages.

## WHY GRIEVING IS AN IMPORTANT STEP IN HEALING

It's important for both partners to grieve after infidelity because grieving allows them to process complex emotions, acknowledge the loss, and ultimately create a foundation for healing—whether they choose to rebuild their relationship or go separate ways.