

Grief in recovery

Addiction is the outcome of forming a strong bond with your drug of choice. Your drug has become your solution to your problem/s with life. Most people use their drug to:

- Feel happier.
- Be more social.
- Feel more content.
- Have a sense of purpose.
- Relax.
- Fill a void.

People who progress to addiction tend to progress to a love/hate relationship with their drug. This relationship can be more powerful than any other, surpassing relationships with physical partners, children, friends, etc.

Therefore, stopping this relationship will be one of the most challenging things you have ever done. When we think of stopping doing something, we often call it “giving up” that thing. It is important for you to realise what you are “giving up” and what you are gaining. There are questions at the end of the module for you to reflect on this.

However bad or good something or someone is for you, if it or they stop being in your life, you will experience grief associated with that loss. This also happens in recovery from drug addiction. Although your decision to stop is a healthy choice, you may still grieve the loss of the relationship with your drug. This is perfectly normal.

So, what can you expect from this process? According to the leading theorists in grief and loss, you may experience what is known as *the five stages of grief*, first researched and written about by Swiss American psychiatrist Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969. She posited the theory that grieving encompasses five distinct stages of emotion, which are sometimes abbreviated as DABDA.

The DABDA five stages of grief and loss are:

1. **D**enial and isolation.
2. **A**nger.
3. **B**argaining.
4. **D**epression.
5. **A**cceptance.

People who are grieving do not necessarily go through the stages in the same order or experience all of them. You may only experience denial and acceptance, or move between all of them many times over, in random order, but what is certain is that you will feel one or all of them associated with your drug abstinence at some stage in your recovery. Hopefully you will reach acceptance quickly and without too much ado. But it's OK if you don't. The strength of your grief will indicate to you how much importance you placed on your drug in your life.

What Kübler-Ross discovered about the terminal cancer patients she followed was that those who succeeded in accepting their condition became more content in every area of their lives. We have seen people achieve abstinence from their drug, only to spiral and become angry and depressed individuals, without understanding that their feelings would subside over time because they were simply grieving. Unfortunately, some people think that being abstinent is causing their unhappiness, and they relapse in the hope of feeling better.

Information about the grieving process helps you to understand it when you go through. You may go back and forward from the other stages at any time, but you will eventually settle into acceptance most of the time. Abstinence is just the foundation on which your recovery will be built. So, let's examine how the grief cycle may unfold for you.

Stage 1: Denial and Isolation – Find relief in honesty and humility.

Denial is the stage that defends you against the reality of survive the loss. At this point, you are facing the consequences of your addiction and leaving the love/hate relationship with your drug. Obviously, you have broken through denial and isolation, the first stage of grief, by being honest enough to recognise that you have a problem and have become humble enough to reach out to us at Miracles to help you. Well done!

However, we see time and time again that the call for help can soon be overcome by fear, where people suffering with addiction become more frightened of losing their drug than they are of dying because of it. They then return to denial, or depression, or bargaining, and may even leave recovery, and relapse.

In the denial stage, you are not living in “actual” reality, but in a “preferable” reality. Denial is a very strong emotion, underpinned by very strong motivations to refuse to see the truth of a situation. It is a defence mechanism against the pain or fear of reality. Isolation helps you stay in denial because you don't need to listen to anyone else or be confronted with the truth. When you are in denial, you demonstrate avoidance, confusion, elation, shock or fear.

What is the solution to this position of despair? For denial, the solution is honesty. For isolation, the solution is identification with others in recovery and/or asking for help, AKA humility. Simple, but not always easy. Your drug use has provided a different reality for you, however subtle that changed reality may have been. It is natural to get annoyed or angry if reality without your drug is less palatable for you in the short term. So, let's move on to stage 2: Anger.

Stage 2: Anger – Find relief in mindfulness, anger management and anxiety management.

This is a common stage where you might ask: “Why me?” and you might think: “Life's not fair!” This is when you may put the blame on other people, often those closest to you are the handiest people upon whom to vent your anger. You could be incredulous that this perceived terrible fate has befallen you. If you have faith, you might start to question your belief in God. “Where is God? Why didn't He protect me?”

However anger manifests in you, it is a necessary part of the grief cycle. Most people will not escape the anger phase. If you don't get angry at some point, professionals may become alarmed as it is important for you to experience this stage.

And professionals encourage acknowledgement of the anger. It's important to accept that you are feeling it. Just like a wound, it must become inflamed before it heals. It's all part of the process. The emotional 'inflammation' is an important part your passage through honest healing. It is a natural response to loss. It will pass quickly if you accept it.

As we discuss in the anger management module, anger can be an emotion you rely on to ground you, to energise you to make changes, to provide you with feelings of power over seemingly untenable situations. You may need to be angry for a while to keep you feeling solid and purposeful in the early days of recovery, rather than lost and untethered to the flow of life. The feeling of 'floating around' that you may feel without your drug can be a very scary one, so anger may relieve the fear for a while. But you need to express that anger in a safe and healthy, respectful way.

When you are angry, you feel frustration, irritation and anxiety. Stopping using your drug is both a difficult and wonderful thing to do. Once you stop, the problem lies in your thinking and subsequent behaviors. We examine ways of dealing with thinking and behaviors in this program. It is about finding new ways of coping because your old ways have not worked. Use what we give you.

The first step in recovery is always awareness: to honestly look at what your addiction itself has created. The second step is always facing the mental and emotional challenges as they arise. And the third step is practising ways of healing the unhealthy mental and emotional wreckage as it arises.

If anger is affecting you, it is important to understand that it could be part of the grief cycle. If it is prolonged and causing problems in your life well beyond this recovery program, you may need to see a professional to sort through other issues that may be causing anger. Stopping your active addiction is not the only grief you may experience in your recovery.

Your challenge here is to use the techniques and strategies presented to you during this program, such as: mindfulness; CBT; anxiety management; eliminating self-pity; assertiveness; boundaries; anger management; values; humility and relapse prevention.

For now, you could focus on expressing your anger in a safe way. Scream into a pillow or something similar, where nobody gets hurt. Do some exercise. Boxing is a good one for anger, and your physique. Try making others around you happy. Strangely enough, helping others often combats anger and could create happiness in your life for today. Give it a try. We also recommend practising mindfulness with kind attention, as presented to you in other modules. Try it and see. Recovery is about becoming the best version of yourself. Stage 3 is called "Bargaining".

Stage 3: Bargaining – Find relief in acceptance of vulnerability and loss

Often addicts relate to bargaining as the pleas they may make when things turn sour while using, such as, *“Please, God, if you get me out of this, I promise to stop using.”* This is bargaining. When you are grieving, you may believe that you can sidestep the uncomfortability of the reality of your loss by negotiating with yourself, others, or your preferred deity.

Bargaining comes in many shapes and forms and is a natural progression from the anger associated with the vulnerability and helplessness of loss. You are struggling to find meaning.

Bargaining takes place in your mind by trying to explain the things that you could have done differently or better: *“If only I hadn’t got involved with that crowd”; “If only I had stuck with that counsellor longer”; “I’ll only drink beer from now on”; “I’ll return to my partner. Then there’ll be no reason to use”; “I read in a magazine that this new herbal pill makes it possible to use without consequences”, or “I will just buy one bottle and hide my keys this time. That way I won’t be able to get more.”*

The bargaining helps bring you control by identifying what could have – or should have – been done to handle the circumstances more effectively. If you are religious or spiritual, the bargaining may actually take place with a higher power. *“If you let me use again, I’ll be a better person”* etc.

When you’re dealing with the reality of the loss of your drug, in essence you are saying: *“I know that I can’t use. If I promise to be better, will you give me the chance to control it once more?”*

The bargaining process helps you accept the truth on an emotional and psychological level. We often hear the bargaining process play out in the rehab. People will postpone telling others they are sick while they attempt to repair damaged relationships. Some will even hope that by eliminating some bad habits, they’ll be granted immunity from addiction after rehab.

By bargaining, you are willing to concede the outcome, but you attempt to do so by squeezing a few more moments of “normal” out of the turmoil pounding in your head. You are clinging to the threads of hope, however thin and worn the fabric may be. It’s a kind of attempt at a temporary suspension of the unavoidable outcome. The end of the active relationship with your drug. Abstinence.

Relief can be found in acceptance of your vulnerability and loss. If no bargain can be reached, you move quickly to stage 4: Depression.

Stage 4: Depression – Find relief in talking to someone or doing some exercise.

Like breaking up with any relationship that you have valued, you are going to feel sad or depressed about the end of the relationship with your drug. You may feel disconnected, numb, sad, and indifferent to things or people you once enjoyed. You could even entertain the notion of not living anymore if you can’t continue the relationship with your drug. Know this **does** pass, like all the other stages. You will not

stay in depression indefinitely. Again, the more you can accept the process, the quicker it will move through you.

Depression is a major feeling for most addicts while facing the consequences that their addiction has created and facing the reality of not being able to use their drug to deal with life anymore. The majority of people in this situation seek help from a doctor and may only talk about their depression, rather than their addiction and what they're trying to do.

IMPORTANT:

If you seek professional help from a psychiatrist or a doctor, be honest and tell them about your addiction and recovery attempt/s. Share with them what you have done or are doing in this program. This will help them treat you appropriately within the process of recovery. There are many cases where addicts seeking help for their depression simply end up with a new drug addiction, so be alert to the addictive quality of any prescribed drug and discuss this with your doctor. The good news is that the depression stage always ends, whether you go back to denial, anger or bargaining, or move on to Stage 5: Acceptance.

Stage 5: Acceptance – Enjoy it!

The last stage of grief is acceptance. This does not mean you lie down and say, “*I give up*”, or that you have to feel OK about ending your drug use. What it means is that you have accepted the loss and you know that you're going to be alright. You are willing to move forward for today.

Acceptance is when you begin to integrate your loss into your new life. This does not mean that you forget, hide or shut the door on your past life; rather, it means that you can acknowledge and accept that it was a part of you, and will always be a part of your experience, but that you must move on from it in order to live well. This is acceptance. This is the beginning of compassion for yourself and the integration of your addiction into “your story”.

In this stage, your emotions will begin to calm down. You re-enter reality. You come to terms with the fact that the “new” reality is that you may never use again – and you're OK with that, a day at a time. You think it may be something you can live with, just for today. It's definitely a time of adjustment and readjustment. There are good and bad days, but you can weather the storms in a much calmer and accepting manner, knowing they will pass.

Reaching this stage doesn't mean you'll never have another bad day. There will certainly still be times when you feel very sad, or angry, or even engage in some sort of bargaining again. However, the good days tend to outnumber the bad days as you move through your life in recovery. In the acceptance stage, life may seem clearer than it has for a long time, and you may begin to engage with your new life in a more joyous way than ever before. You understand that your drug can never be replaced, but you accept the loss and incorporate it into your new reality without sadness or regret.

So, what could your new reality look like? A life beyond your wildest dreams and freedom from active addiction. This is why it is vital to look at all the consequences that your addiction has caused, with an open mind and an honest heart. Only then you can see what is offered in recovery. And this is where you come to understand that in the future, your experience can and will help others who also feel this grief, this fear and this terror of loss. This is where you have the opportunity to feel the great joy of coming together with others who may be travelling through the same grief process. You can help one another “move forward” with your grief as part of your life stories, not something to be feared or avoided. What a freedom!

Symptoms of grief

Grief symptoms can be physical, mental, emotional, social, behavioral, and/or spiritual, and can include:

- Anxiety.
- Restlessness.
- Anger or irritability.
- Frustration.
- Questioning the purpose of life and your beliefs.
- Aches and pains.
- Isolation from friends and family.
- Worry.
- Crying.
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Fatigue.
- Guilt.
- Headaches.
- Loss of appetite.
- Feelings of detachment.
- Stress.
- Abnormal behavior.

Individual ways of processing grief

Now that you are aware of the stages of grief and the likelihood that you may experience them (not all people do), you can set up a plan outlining how to cope when you feel you are experiencing any or all the stages.

During the first stage, you may be able to break the pattern of **denial/isolation** and create relief by practising honesty and humility.

During the second stage, you may be able to break the pattern of **anger** and create relief by practising mindfulness, anger management, anxiety management, helping others, etc.

During the third stage, you may be able to break the pattern of **bargaining** and create relief by practising acceptance of your vulnerability and loss.

During the fourth stage, you may be able to break the pattern of **depression** and create relief by talking to someone, connecting with others, doing some exercise or seeing a doctor.

During the fifth and last stage, you may be able to break the pattern of resisting **acceptance** and enjoy the feelings of peace and contentment that come with accepting your loss and integrating it into your present and future life.

These are just suggestions. You can find other coping mechanisms that suit you. You may know some more productive ways of getting through the stages.

Grief is intimately linked to fear; some would go so far as to say “terror”. Sometimes loss feels so total and final that people can feel terror of the future, having to live without the person or thing to which they have become attached. They have placed a high value on that person or thing and have depended on it for life itself. This creates an extraordinarily strong urge not to feel the loss. Some people can remain in denial for an awfully long time. Try to reach out and be honest about your feelings during recovery. We can help you through it, rather than having to face the struggle alone.

Grief and faith

Faith in itself has been named one of the strongest healing powers when it comes to grief. What we have learnt is that people in recovery who believe in something can maintain a shred of hope and sanity. Those who have faith have a safety net that will catch them when they fall. So instead of spiralling down endlessly into an abyss, there's a soft net for those who believe they are looked after by some higher power. They are able to keep moving.

Whether it's God or nature or a spirit of the universe, try to imagine there is something 'out there' that carries broken addicts and wraps them in an ethereal shawl, just as a mother wraps her children up and keeps them warm.

Unresolved grief

At times we become caught or trapped in grief and we cannot resolve it, or assimilate it into our life, beyond the loss. It is important that you become familiar with the warning signs of unresolved grief, so that you can work towards breaking through to the other side.

Warning signs of unresolved grief can be similar to depression and can include some of the symptoms of depression, such as: trouble with sleeping (insomnia or sleeping too much), trouble with under-or-over-eating, difficulty connecting to others, not keeping yourself nice (looking after your appearance and hygiene), enduring sadness, lack of motivation, inability to smile or feel any pleasure in your life.

Please do a self-check to see whether you have any of these warning signs at the moment. Experiencing any of these signs for a day or two is not alarming. It is when you have one or more of the signs over a longer period of time that it may be heralding the need for help and you will need to seek professional help.

Sometimes the grief in recovery is not necessarily about the loss of your drug, but about other losses you have never resolved because you have avoided processing them by using your drug. You may have a backlog of unresolved grief to work through in early recovery.

We present a module about post-acute withdrawal syndrome (PAWS) and some of the signs of grief fit in with PAWS symptoms too. It would be wise to talk to someone about the symptoms and at least begin to explore their origin. If we have not covered PAWS yet, you can research PAWS symptoms for yourself. It is fascinating and explains a lot regarding feelings during early recovery.

Sleep is one of many important recovery patterns that our body and mind needs. It is also vital to have balanced sleep of six to eight hours a night and that it is not medically induced, if possible.

Food can easily be an addictive way of coping with grief. Losing your appetite is very common during periods of grief. At those times, you need to be aware of the importance of a healthy intake of nutrition.

Isolation can, of course, occur in a way that is more subtle. We may be physically present, but we have shut down inside and are not sharing how we are feeling. We may be emotionally absent. This is why we encourage you to find and express your feelings during early recovery. This can help break through this stage of emotional numbness or shutdown.

Avoid any form of drugs through this period. Being sad is OK for a while, every now and then. In fact, it is probably a necessary rite of passage. Most of the time, we need help from others with our motivation. Use a gratitude list for a period of time and, if possible, watch comedy movies. One way of regaining pleasure might be to focus on how you can create pleasure in others' lives. How can you help others? Think about this.

Recommended Videos

Attachment Theory and "Drug of Choice" - clip from Grief/Loss in Addiction/Recovery - March 2018

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grPJEtMhtoA> (4:12)

TED Talk: We don't "move on" from grief. We move forward with it | Nora McInerny

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khkJkR-ipfw> (15:05)

Grieving the loss of your addiction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej4MjUEmplo&t=163s> (12:37)

TED Talk: How to transform grief into growth | Kelsey Low

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSDXh3lBrlQ> (8:28)

TED Talk: The adventure of grief | Dr. Geoff Warburton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juET61B1P98> (20:37)

Reflective Questions: Grief in Recovery

1. Write about how you feel today and identify whether you are in one of the stages of grief today.

2. Did any of the symptoms of grief or unresolved grief ring any bells for you?

Yes _____ **No** _____ If so, explain. If not, explain.

3. Do you think you have ever been in denial about your addiction?

Yes _____ **No** _____ If so, describe your denial. If not, explain.

4. Have you felt anger since stopping your drug?

Yes _____ **No** _____ **Not sure** _____

If so, how has it manifested? In other words, how have you shown your anger?

5. Write down examples of how you may have “bargained” in the past (e.g.: “Get me out of this one and I’ll never use again”, “If I just use a different drug, I might be OK”, etc).

6. Have you “bargained” about your drug use and recovery since starting this program?

7. Have you felt sad about making the decision to stop using your drug?

Yes _____ No _____ If so, why? If not, why not?

8. Are you sad today?

Yes _____

No _____

Not sure _____

If so, how is your sadness manifesting? In other words, what does your sadness look like (e.g., crying, under the doona, eating ice-cream, being a cranky pants etc)?

9. Do you miss your drug? If so, what do you miss about it?

10. Are the things that you miss good for you, or good for others?

Yes _____ **No** _____ If so, why? If not, why not?

11. Do you miss the things that got you into trouble or hurt you or others?

Yes _____ **No** _____ If so, why? If not, why not?

12. Do you feel fearful about the future?

Yes _____

No _____ If so, describe your fears. If not, why not?

13. Do you have faith that it will all work out?

Yes _____

No _____ If so, explain. If not, explain.

14. Are you able to see the process you are going through right now as a natural grieving process that will end eventually, if you keep moving forward?

Yes _____ **No** _____ If so, explain. If not, explain.

