



# Missionaries to Ministers and Ministering to Missionaries

## **Pandemic Grief**

**Feeling our way through April 2020 so that we will find hope.**

If you've ever flown on an airplane and looked at the patchwork of farmland below, you have been high enough to see the colorful patterns. I often pause and smile at what looks like a quilt people have made for the Lord without even knowing it. Patterns, patchwork, and formula help us to feel secure and in control. This season of global pandemic and uncertainty leaves us without a framework for where we are headed. We long for a view from above where we can see it knit together from start to finish.

What we do know is people are experiencing loss on many levels. Some normal and abnormal events of life are not recognized in normal ways. Loved ones are dying and only 10 people can celebrate their life in person in parts of the world, and weddings are paired down to the same size or rescheduled. People are losing their jobs and fearful of how to feed their families. Suicide is increasing as hopelessness abounds. Graduates are left confused and robbed of walking the line. We are walking through stages of grief in our cultures. Wherever you are on this planet, there have been people experiencing universal feelings as a result of this virus called COVID-19.

### **Formula or Validation of Feelings?**

Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote the grief cycle for those who were losing their loved ones. She intended it to help families understand and validate their emotions as they faced the painful loss of control that is felt in death. I find this particular graph helpful as the emotions underlying the stages are clarifying and the blue bar below gives action to the general need in the stages.

It is important to realize that grief feelings are not necessarily ordered as this graph suggests. They often feel like a tangled ball of emotion, but eventually, if they are allowed to be felt, you can end up in a place of grounded acceptance, but the timing varies. You don't even need to go through all of the stages. It is not a perfect formula, but a common process to notice and validate your process of grief.

# Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle



**Feel and Cope:** It is April, 2020, and we can notice how we have faced much of the shock and fear, now sheltering in place in many continents around the world. It is understandable for people to be moving into the anger stage. Some countries sheltering in place through suggestion, some through mandate. Both can cause varying degrees of irritability and pain. My husband Shane and I have witnessed people driving through red lights as if to say, "I can't do this anymore! I'm not following the rules!" This level of anxiety, for some, can lead to hostility, for others to depression. In some horrifying cases, people have committed suicide. Many factors pave the way for where you may land on that spectrum, but your healthy coping skills (relational, spiritual, physical, emotional) are critical in order to remain as balanced as possible in grief. (see previous article *Keep Calm and Carry On?*)

With suicidal ideation, there are greater risk factors for those with greater energy and strength. People struggling with Anxiety Disorders, Bipolar Mania, and Men have higher suicide rates. It is critical to not minimize emotions as merely irrational, but instead acknowledge them as an alarm system blaring inside the body of someone who needs help. (see previous article on Mental Health Safety Kit)

## **Focused Perspective:**

There are so many adjustments and losses like never before that we are in need of a perspective that keeps us grounded. The way we grieve, celebrate, and have

community is on hold and shifting. What we thought was in our control is no longer, so our focus is forced to move. Depending upon where our gaze lands will determine our day. As the Psalmist wrote, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but longing fulfilled is the tree of life” (Psalm 13:12). When our hope in our plans are deferred we have to look to what we are convinced of. The Bible affirms that “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The previously accepted “New Normal” phrase through suffering is not yet helpful, but taking “One Day at a Time” allows each day to be part of a journey we are all walking out together. There is nothing normal about this virus’ impact.

When we were planning our wedding, Shane chose a scripture that would define our lives and the ministry the Lord would have us lead.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:24-5).

We could not have known standing on the stage of our church, holding hands and vowing to each other our lives 23 years ago that we would face many trials from loss of 3 parents, addiction recovery, brain surgery, seizure recovery, robberies and threats. Yet through it all, our foundation has been built on a rock that has allowed us to stand and have an amazing life together. But God designed marriage like He designed our relationship with Him, a committed bond that through the storm, we stand grounded with a faithful God. He never leaves us.

As you begin or continue to realize He is your rock, your stability, you also will want to find others who share this place of foundation as they will bring hope to you in your disappointments. Then, sharing that hope with others, offering them a place on that rock is a gift to them and to you. It is like a sealer to the foundation. As you see the new sparkle in their eyes about their newfound hope in Jesus, it will radiate back to you.

**Reframing:** David Kessler, the co-author of Dr. Kübler-Ross’ book *On Grief and Grieving* in a recent interview by the Harvard Business Review shared his insights on the pandemic grief from his research. Dr. Ross allowed him to add a sixth stage, meaning. This one cannot be pushed by others, but as we allow the process of grief to unfold, meaning can come.

When I came home with a half paralyzed face after brain surgery we were all in shock. That was not the plan. We had not prepared for this. But the first night home, after Shane prayed for me, the Lord dropped a reframed perspective into my mind: He must want to use this **for my good and for His glory**. I'd never spoken or heard that phrase before and it was as if he wrote it on the walls of my heart. A new frame for my journey with a paralyzed face and painful journey ahead. I needed it, and that phrase has been more true than I could have ever imagined. If someone had told me that six days after brain surgery, it would have been annoying, but the Lord in His gentleness and care offered me a truth with His peace that would guide my life from that moment on. He has a phrase for you too. The Psalmist encouraged us to "Seek His peace and pursue it" (Ps. 34:14). He is not hiding it from us, even when the emotions involved in grief feel like He is. He is the Lord that notices everything and cares about you. If we are to get to a place of acceptance, the most important truth to accept is His love for you.

**Receiving:** Paul Young, the author of *The Shack*, wrote, "It took nearly 50 years to peel the face of my father off of the face of God." Just as we are made to desire structure and formula, some more than others, we are also made to attach to our primary caregivers. However, if they do not have the ability to care for the child's needs, then that child is left with a distorted view of God. This is often why people feel punished by God in the midst of their pain. Even if they claim to not know Him, all of a sudden they will declare a negative faith in a punitive deity. Recognizing the imprinting patterns of the past can go a long way to see the Lord clearly and finally be able to know His presence, hear His voice, and be guided by His peace. Peeling off people's faces from the majesty, gentleness, guidance, and comfort of our Lord might be worth your while, so that your grieving time can be productive.

There is a lot to do, isn't there? The common thread that has held us together in the storm is our loving God who understands us as we grieve. Consider allowing Him into your process of feeling, focusing, reframing, and receiving today. You may begin to have the kind of peace that calms the anxious heart, transforms our understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. As each of us walk, one day at a time, with a vision of the future that is from God's perspective from above, we may create the farmland patchwork, knit together...for our good, and for His glory.

Praying for you today,

Marty

<https://m2minc.net>

Rev. Marty D. Couch, LMFT, LPCC

Specialized Mental Health Chaplain AGUSM

## Resources

Kessler: [www.grief.com](http://www.grief.com)

Kessler: <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

### Books

*On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*  
by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, David Kessler

*Healing After Loss; Daily Meditations for Working through Grief*

By Martha Whitmore Hickman

*The Grace in Dying*

By Kathleen Dowling Singh

*The Grief Recovery Handbook* by John James and Russell Friedman

*A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*

by Jerry L. Sittser

### Music

Steven Curtis Chapman's album "Beauty will Rise"

### Journaling Exercise

Today I feel....
When I feel this way, the thoughts that go through my head are...
When I feel this way and think these thoughts, what I want to do is...
My choice today is..
My prayer for today:
<i>L.I.F.E. Guide for Women by freedomeveryday.org</i>

\*\*Keep a notebook of the dumb things that unhelpful people say...

(btw...Don't put their names in the notebook. No need to carry resentment. This is a place to put a list of things you want to be sure to **not** say to others someday!)