

Grief and Loss

Stages of Grief

(Developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross)

Note: You may not experience these feelings in the order listed below. Each person experiences grief in their own way. These are just common feelings that someone experiencing a loss may have.

Denial

“I’m fine.”

This phase may take many forms. Immediately following your accident, you may have had thoughts like, “This isn’t happening to me,” or “The doctors don’t know what they are saying, there must be some mistake”. You may just feel numb, not quite realizing the extent of your injury or the impact it might have on your life. Later, you may be in denial of your condition – continuously seeking a cure, seeking out more specialists regardless of the fact they are all telling you the same thing. Or maybe you completely avoid the situation altogether – return to work or complete tasks like before you were injured.

Anger (or frustration)

You may find yourself easily agitated, more irritable. You are frustrated with constantly being in pain and not getting the results you want from others. You may feel angry with the doctors, your pain, your body, your family or “the system” for not being more understanding, not helping you enough, or helping you too much. You may be focused on blaming others, pointing fingers.

Bargaining

“I promise to _____ if _____”.

You may bargain with your higher power, yourself, your employers, your doctors WSIB/insurance, etc. In this phase you may rationalize behaviours you know will hurt you in the long run.

“I’ll just finish this task so it’s done and I’ll ignore the pain”.

Depression

In this phase, you may feel completely overwhelmed, experiencing feelings of hopelessness or helplessness. You may not feel like doing anything, have problems concentrating, changes in sleeping (too little, too much), change in your appetite. You may just feel like isolating from others or just giving up.

Please note: It is important to discuss these feelings with your doctor.

Acceptance

In this phase, you come to accept that you have a chronic pain condition, and you find ways to manage and even thrive regardless of the pain. You accept the things you cannot change, focusing on what you can do, and how you can manage better. Once you have achieved acceptance, you may be able to look forward to life experiences again, such as feel happy or laugh. This is where the strategies you learn here in the program come to be most useful.

You transition from “I can’t do anything” to
“How can I manage my pain while doing that?”

Acceptance

There is a growing amount of research that highlights the benefits of acceptance as it relates to chronic pain. These benefits include an improvement in overall emotional and physical functioning. In other words, quality of life improves as people move their focus away from “I want this pain gone” to “How can I continue to live my life, even though I have pain”, or maybe “How can I move from just surviving each day” to “living my life again”.

Myths of acceptance

“If I accept my pain, I’m giving up”.

This is a common thought, however, this is not the case. By moving towards acceptance people find that they have more control over their life and their pain, leaving more energy for other things, including becoming a more positive advocate for themselves.

At least, acceptance is not giving up trying. It is giving up thinking that things are not different now, or that you don’t have to deal with this in a new way. Accepting what is happening, you can start to take positive action.

“Acceptance means that I’m okay with having pain forever”.

You can accept that you have a problem at least for now. Maybe, it will resolve in the future. Maybe, it will not. But now, you have a condition that demands some kind of adjustment.

It is about accepting that right now you have pain and recognizing that you have to do things differently than before you had any pain. It’s about living with it.

“Acceptance does not mean you like it”.

You don’t have to like something to accept it. You have to be willing to recognize it for what it is and be willing to act accordingly.

Acceptance is the willingness to say, “Yes, this is happening,” and to move forward doing your best with what you have. When you admit “this is real” you are beginning to accept. When you then say “how will I deal with it?” you are there.

Write down some additional reasons why you might not want to move into acceptance and discuss these with your case manager.

So what is Acceptance?

Acceptance is a shift in thinking. It is recognizing that because of your situation, you must change the way that you approach things to minimize your own frustrations and pain experiences.

Consider the expression “Nothing changes if nothing changes”. Think about how you typically approach tasks, situations and even social interactions. Are you happy with the outcome? If not, you must change your approach or the outcomes will remain the same. Your current approach might be avoidance, or it might even be to keep doing things like you always have.

When you are able to admit that the pain is real and that you must change your attitude and thinking about the pain, you are moving towards acceptance. Once you are able to see past the obstacles, and instead consider how to do things differently, you are there. It also means recognizing that you are not “the pain” but rather someone who has pain among many other things (good and bad), it is not the defining feature of who you are.

What is acceptance for you?

Ideas to help manage feelings of loss

- Talk to people who understand, perhaps people experiencing similar feelings, and/or professionals who may be able to help you work through these feelings. Acknowledging and talking about your feelings will help to start the process of working towards acceptance.
- Recognize that these losses are significant and it will take time to adjust. Give yourself permission to grieve them – denying your feelings will only lead to continued feelings of anger and/or depression.
- If you are concerned about your feelings of anger or depression, speak to your doctors! They may be able to help.
- Take care of yourself physically. If you ignore your physical needs, your emotional health will also suffer. Sleep, proper nutrition and physical exercise can play a major role in how you manage stressful situations.
- Plan ahead. Remember to modify, pace and take breaks. Once you start to experience successes, you can build upon them. Before you know it, you are enjoying life again and focusing less on what you are not able to do.
- Positive self-talk. Use positive messages to remind yourself that things will get better. This may become especially important when experiencing a flare up in pain.
- Be open to change. Many people are uncomfortable with change because it is unknown and unfamiliar. However, many great things happen with change – if we allow them to happen.
- Moving towards acceptance does not mean you are “giving up”. Instead, it allows you to move in a more positive direction. You will not be sentenced to a lifetime of more pain because of acceptance. In fact, letting go of anger or moving out of depression may actually minimize the effect pain has on your life. It’s about improving the quality of your life, “living” once again.