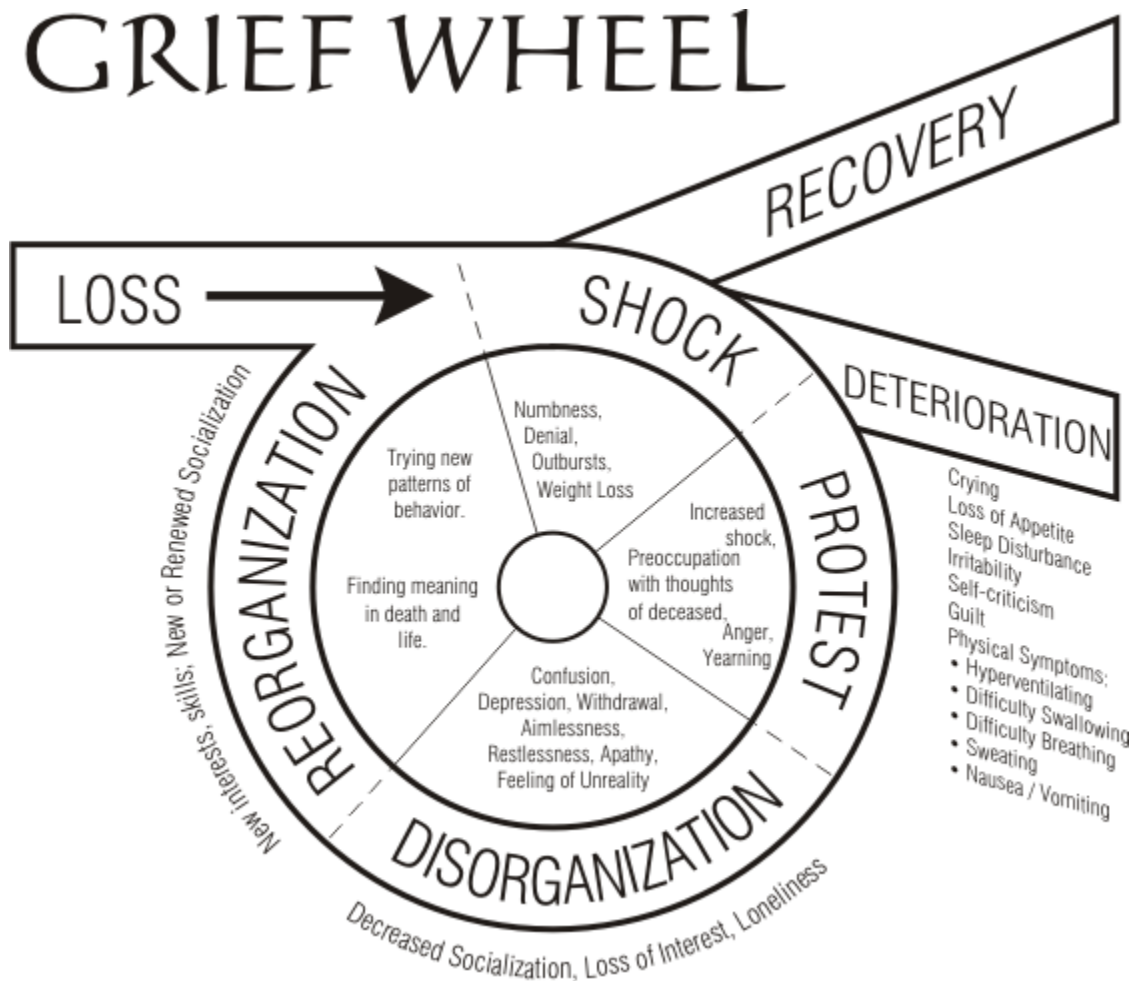


# NAVIGATING THE GRIEF WHEEL

*\*\*\*This article was written by Errol Hale, founding pastor at Grace Bible Church. This article on the Grief Wheel was posted in the September 2009 Mom Minus Dad e-newsletter available at [www.momminusdad.com](http://www.momminusdad.com).*



By Errol Hale (<http://www.gbcmpk.org/>)

I do not know who designed the Grief Wheel. I was introduced to it by a pastor friend who used it in helping people deal with the death of loved ones. Because each of us is unique, and enter times of bereavement with our own individual personalities, character traits and personal history, some may follow the pattern outlined by the Wheel exactly. Some not at all. Still others will find themselves experiencing some, but not all of the phases.

This is why I must clarify from the outset, the Grief Wheel is not intended to tell you how you *should* feel. It is not a diagram of the process you *will* go through. Rather, it is only an indicator of how many do feel and the process many do go through.

There are four ways the Grief Wheel may help you through the difficult period:

1. It may relieve fears that you are cracking up because you are experiencing extreme emotions.
2. It will assure you that you are not weird or alone in the way you feel. Countless others have gone through these same experiences before you.
3. It encourages you to be patient with yourself, not demanding that you feel other than how you feel. Feelings are neither right nor wrong. Our reactions to our feelings can be and often are, however. As Amy Carmichael wrote, "Nothing anyone can do to us can harm us, only our reactions can bless or burn."
4. It reminds you that unpleasant feelings are not permanent. They will give way to other feelings. As the Grief Wheel illustrates, there is hope ahead. There is a light at the end of the tunnel of grieving. As the Psalmist declared, "*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.*" (Psalm 30:5)

Be aware that after experiencing the loss of a loved one, there is a possibility of flying off the wheel into Deterioration. This is the one occurrence that you must be careful to steer clear of. As you pass through Shock, Protest, Disorganization, and Reorganization, as long as you are on the wheel, you are headed for Recovery. Deterioration on the other hand, while not fatal, can be a downward slide into deeper personal problems. Be aware of those symptoms and seek help if you feel you are headed in that direction.

Let's take a brief look at the seven component parts of the Grief Wheel.

## **LOSS**

Loss may begin even before a loved one dies. The sense of loss may begin in the final stages of a terminal illness. This sense of loss is hard to describe. Maybe the best way, although still inadequate, is that you feel that part of you has died. People experience this feeling to varying degrees depending on how close they were to the person who has died.

## **SHOCK**

Shock usually sets in soon after a loved one has died. For some, it comes in hours. For others within a few days. In either case, shock causes different personality types to react differently. Often emotional people will have emotional outbursts, including crying or screaming. Those who are usually "in control" are more likely to go through a time of denial, or an unwillingness to admit what has really happened. Still others will experience wide mood swings, from crying to withdrawal, and back again.

Anger, even at the deceased (for dying) is not uncommon.

During this initial period of shock, many will lose weight due to a loss of appetite and a great deal of nervous energy.

For many, time seems to stand still during this period. Time has no meaning. Days turn to weeks without notice.

During this time, many find it hard to make decisions. This is especially difficult, since there are often many decisions that need to be made with regard to funeral arrangements, etc. A prime reason it is so difficult to make decisions during this time is that in light of the loss of a loved one, little else seems to matter. Seek reliable help to stand by you when you have to make decisions during this time. Avoid making major decisions that do not have to be made until you are further on your way toward Recovery.

While people do experience different kinds of symptoms as they pass through it, the Shock phase is almost universal. Remember to hold your course. You will get through this period.

## **DETERIORATION**

People who are going to slide off the Grief Wheel into Deterioration are more likely to do so during the Shock or Protest stages. Deterioration is a downhill slide into depression.<sup>1</sup> Deterioration is usually shock that has been left unchecked. Beside increased symptoms of shock, other symptoms of Deterioration fall into two categories as follows:

**Physical Symptoms:**

Either continued loss of appetite, or overeating as a means of dealing with emotional pain.

Continued trouble sleeping--either too much, or too little. Those who find themselves relying on medication for sleep over a prolonged period are likely to be headed for trouble as well.

Stomach or digestive problems, caused by stress.

Respiratory problems caused by stress.

It is important to take care of yourself physically when under the stress of bereavement. When physical health is neglected, emotional health is sure to suffer as well.

**Emotional Symptoms:**

Guilt and self-criticism. Playing an endless game of "What if . . ." or "If only I'd have . . ."

Feeling hopelessness and despair.

Feeling useless. (This is especially the case when one has found their greatest meaning and purpose in serving a loved one who has now died.)

Social isolation, a typical form of depression often takes place. Those experiencing this tend not to want to be around people.

Ultimately (and very infrequently) some go so far as to have suicidal feelings. Do not mistake normal feelings about life and death with suicidal feelings. It is not uncommon to wonder why the loved one died and you did not. It is normal to long to be with a deceased loved one--even longing to die. Suicidal feelings are different however, in that those who experience them actually begin to think of, and possibly talk about taking their own life. This is far more serious.

If these or other similar emotional symptoms continue, seek help from a pastor or Biblical counselor immediately.

**PROTEST**

The protest stage is often accompanied by a preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased. While it is good to think about the lost loved one, you must be cautious not to dwell on those thoughts that lead to depression, or anger. As Christians, we must trust in the sovereign hand of God. Anger or protest against those things over which we have no control is rebellion against God who is in control.

The way out of the Protest stage is through faith that God is in control. He knows what He is doing and He only does that which is good and right according to His purposes that are beyond our own. Reading and meditating on passages of scripture that deal with God's sovereignty is helpful. (See booklet of scripture passages.)

**DISORGANIZATION**

This stage may not seem like progress, but it is. During the disorganization stage, you may feel confused. Things may still seem out of focus. Normal activities may seem unimportant, leaving you with a sense of aimlessness. In this twilight of unreality, you may remain withdrawn, or reluctant to pursue new relationships. As the healing takes place, these feelings will pass as reality begins again to set in, even if it does so slowly.

It is important not to resist the help of people who are reaching out during this period of adjustment. Even though their words or actions may appear clumsy or misguided, they are offering help that is needed to get from disorganization into reorganization.

## **REORGANIZATION**

At this point, an increased interest in socialization occurs. You may discover new or previously unidentified interests. New lifestyle and behavior patterns will begin to be developed as a life without the deceased must be forged. You are beginning to have a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

## **RECOVERY**

Recovery is happening when have come to accept the loss. Decision making will become easier and safer.<sup>2</sup>

While there will be occasional and temporary pain associated with memories, they will be fewer and there will be greater time between them. The memories of the loved one will not go away, nor should they, but painful memories will give way to happier memories.

Even after you think you are well into recovery, there will be people, words, or occurrences that will cause a flood of emotion to come over you. This can happen for months or even years. Do not fight it. Ride it out. It will pass. You may even want to thank the Lord during those moments that the loved one was so meaningful in your life, that occasionally you have to deal with your emotions, even after a period of time has passed.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

As was stated at the beginning, the Grief Wheel is not a law that is intended to direct your feelings. But it will tip you off concerning how you may feel, based on the experience of others who have already traveled on the path of bereavement. The Wheel is a tool. Like a road map, it can help you discover where you are on your journey, and assist you in navigating your course to your desired destination. Do not expect to feel any of the emotions the Wheel describes, but don't be surprised if you do.

Be encouraged that you are not the only one who has had to deal with the feelings you are experiencing, nor will you be the last. Do not become impatient with yourself if you seem to be recovering at a slower rate than you, or others, think you should. You will make it. Sooner or later, the pain will subside, and you will be okay again.

Most importantly, keep your eyes on Jesus Christ. If you are a disciple of Christ, know and be reassured that He is with you every step of the way. He knows what He is doing -- even when we do not! He always does what is good and in accord with His eternal purposes. If you have not committed your life to Jesus Christ, may I suggest you do so. He alone has the power over life and death.

## **FOOTNOTES**

- 1 It should be noted that depression is a natural emotion that most all people experience from time to time. It is often heightened during a time of loss. If, and when, depression is left unchecked and becomes chronic, it is very difficult to pull out of. The more depressed a person becomes, the harder it becomes to pull out. Therefore, wisdom counsels us to take whatever necessary steps we can to counter depression before we are in so deep it becomes chronic.

From a spiritual standpoint, we do well also to realize that depression is related to self and selfishness. Although that may seem to be a harsh accusation, try to think objectively about it. Depression is a matter of discontentment because we are not receiving or experiencing what we want to receive or experience. While it is natural to have these feelings from time to time, if allowed to remain unchecked, this discontentment/depression becomes sin. It is sin because it is self-centered. It is sin because it calls into question and refuses to accept the sovereign hand of God in our lives.

Dealing with, and overcoming the sin of discontentment/depression is no different than dealing with any other sin. You must first recognize it for what it is: selfishness and rebellion. Next, you need to confess it, which means agree with God about it. Then, you must forsake it. You will have more success in forsaking sin if you will confess it to another person who will in turn hold you accountable to forsake it.

- 2 Making important life-affecting decisions during the first year after the loss of an immediate family member is often regretted. It is safer to wait until well into the recovery phase before relocating, changing jobs, marrying, etc.