

KÜBLER-ROSS' STAGES OF DYING

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' book *On Death and Dying* helped to popularize a characterization of the process of grief as steps or stages through which the dying and, to some extent, those close to them ordinarily pass. While she was hardly the originator of the idea, her book has provided access to this useful tool for thousands of health care professionals. Used carefully, these stages can be helpful in recognizing and responding to the psychological state and needs of those in grief.

A note of caution should be offered from the outset: you should avoid thinking of these "Five Stages of Dying" as necessary elements in an inevitable sequence or as levels to be mastered. The stage of acceptance is not a goal to be accomplished by means of the other steps. While patients tend to go through a series of stages, they may go back and forth, skip about or have periods where the stages seem to overlap, all according to their particular needs. With this in mind, it is helpful to think of grief as tending to approximate five stages:

[denial](#) of death because they are unable to admit to themselves that the patient might die and/or they will suffer the loss death represents;

[anger](#) by which the pain of loss is projected onto others;

[bargaining](#) which represents a last effort at overcoming death by "earning" longer life;

[depression](#) when the full impact of imminent death strikes them; and

[acceptance](#) when the grieving come to grips with the fact of the patient's death and make preparation for it.

These stages reflect the needs of the dying patient and others and the devices they use to cope with them. It is most important for you to remember that the loss by death to and of the patient is probably the greatest loss those affected will ever experience. The prospect of death, then, will be the greatest crisis one can face. For most people, this crisis can be endured only with at least the temporary help of coping devices like those suggested by the stages.

There are, of course, [other models](#) for understanding this important process which are well-worth your reading. One which deserves your special consideration is in the more recent work of [Backer, Hannon and Russell](#) .