



Stages of Grief in Chronic Pain (Excerpt from p 218 -219)ⁱ

All of the normal stages of grief and dying may be evident. In chronic pain there is a grieving process that occurs over time due to trauma, and most sufferers grieve for their lost selves. This also holds true for the sufferer's family and significant others.

Denial for the chronic pain sufferer involves the actual trauma/injury that was done to the body. There is disbelief that the body has been affected and has disappointed the self: "This wasn't supposed to happen to me; this isn't the way that I planned my life."

The shock is a reaction to the intensity of the actual pain, which has an impact on every aspect of the person's daily life, and the realization that it is not going away.

The **anger** stage is experienced as "Why is this happening to me?" Watching others live their normal lives is difficult, as they see their own lives halted from the pain.

The **bargaining** stage develops as a defense mechanism to shield the sufferer from the reality of his/her new situation. The sufferer thinks, "Instead of doing the usual dozen things I did before the pain, I will only do six of them." Reality hits when the person feels intense pain from doing those six things when only one, or perhaps none, should have been done that day.

The **depression** is two-fold: it is the physical result of the trauma and the emotional aspect. Depression occurs in most people with chronic pain due to changes in the nervousness system and spinal cord. The emotional aspect is due to the losses in one's life due to the pain, ex. not being able to work in profession, not able to perform tasks of being a parent/child/spouse, not able to peel a carrot or hold a quart of milk. If the person had depression before the chronic pain then the depression becomes worse.

The **acceptance** stage is realizing that the trauma has changed the physical self and life in general: "My body is not the way it used to be." It is difficult to realize and accept that significant life changes will need to be made because there is still hope that the pain will disappear. But to stop here is to accept that the pain will not go away, that there is no cure.

Changing/reinventing yourself is the essential sixth step that needs to be added to the stages of grief experienced with chronic pain. Once sufferers have accepted that their bodies cannot do what they used to do, they need to work with it and reassess their lifestyles.



If this is not done, the sufferers remain in a state of resistance, trying to prove that they are still the same people. This adds fuel to the fire and contributes to poor self-concept, which further contributes to severe depression. The challenge for the sufferers is to reinvent the self, accepting the person now in this body. They must not live in the past, their past selves. This is a rebirth. These stages happen over a period of time and vary from person to person. When this occurs, the sufferer then moves into being a person with chronic pain.

This process was verbalized by a group member who stated, “I am sorry for not being who I used to be.” This stage usually occurs at a considerable amount of time after the initial trauma, when the pain has not gone away, when it has become part of daily life, 24 hours a day. The whole concept of self is shaken. It is an identity crisis that was not expected. The people cannot do things the way they have in the past. The sufferers cannot count on themselves and others can no longer count on them. Their family lives and careers are affected. They may feel useless, hopeless, guilty, resentful, angry, depressed, or full of self-pity. They are also probably very tired from the emotional upheaval as well as from interrupted sleep patterns. However, to others, who cannot see the pain, they appear normal. This is how pain operates. It is a syndrome. It is a disease. It is not understood by many except, perhaps, by their loved ones and others who also suffer.

When there are people at different stages of the grief process in the group, the “veterans” are able to help the newcomers define their situation. This gives them insight and a direction to follow. It is acknowledgment and recognition for what they are going through, which normalizes their condition. This brings a sigh of relief that they are not “going crazy.” It is just a normal stage that people go through when they suffer from chronic pain. For the veterans, it also acknowledges how far they have come in this process of healing and how much control they now have over their lives.

Note: First five stages adopted from Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death & Dying*, Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1969.

ⁱ MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: CHRONIC PAIN MANUAL FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS