

## Why We Should Say Goodbye to the Five Stages of Grief

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Unless otherwise stated, these ideas came from Susan Cadell, MSW, PhD, RSW. Cadell is a social work researcher and professor at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. She shared these ideas in a workshop with the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Watch the full video of this workshop by clicking [here](#).

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### Loss and Grief During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most people have experienced loss over the past 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since many of us have been grieving, more and more people are sharing information about the topic, such as the fact that we can grieve other losses that are not related to death.\*

In her article on Medium, Susan Cadell wrote, “So much is being lost in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. We have lost our routines and many freedoms. Many people have lost their jobs. We have lost the ability to visit freely with one another and, in some cases, to go outside our homes. And some people have lost their lives while others have lost the opportunity to be with people who are dying or grieving.”\*

This expanded definition of grief can validate people’s emotional distress and experiences. On the other hand, *misinformation* about grief can cause people to feel worse.\* In her professional opinion as a social work researcher and professor, Cadell explained how one of the most well-known ways of understanding grief is actually unhelpful.

### The Five Stages of Grief: Media vs. Reality

For decades, countless movies and TV shows have used the Five Stages of Grief Model as a key part of stories about characters who are coping with loss.\* These stories typically separate the experience of grief into neat chapters. First, characters experience and complete Stage 1: Denial. Then, they move onto Stage 2: Anger, and so on. Almost every time, characters move from one stage to the next one in a linear way.\* In other words, when they’re in Stage 4: Depression, they can’t be angry again because they are past Stage 2: Anger.

This model of understanding grief does exist outside of being a plot device, but Cadell outlines some key differences with the real theory and how it’s depicted in the media. First of all, this process was never meant to be linear.\* Although it’s an easy way to organize a story, grief

doesn't work that way in real life. The second difference is that this model was not intended to be about people who are grieving any type of loss.\* It was made to specifically describe feelings that are experienced by people who are aware that they are dying.\*

### **What's wrong with the Five Stages of Grief Model?**

The Five Stages of Grief Model was developed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969, and it was innovative at the time. However, this model can cause people to feel unnecessary guilt and shame about not grieving "the right way" because they are not feeling all of those five feelings or in a particular order.\*

### **So then, what's the right way to grieve?**

The short answer: there isn't.

Jessica Jackson, the trauma-informed practitioner, educator, and writer behind [Soft Path Healing](#), explains that, when it comes to trauma, "folks have unique experiences because they also have a unique nervous system, support system (or lack thereof), allostatic load (... how much built up stress someone is carrying), and protective factors (again, or lack thereof)."

In other words, there is no standard way to grieve because there are too many variables to account for in each person's past and present. To illustrate, let's say that both you and your coworker lost your job due to the pandemic. Even if it was the same job at the same company, it's completely normal for you both to feel different things and react in different ways. One person may start to grieve right away while the other one might not allow themselves to start grieving until they have a new job. All of these feelings are valid.

Equally important, there is no "right time" for grieving to be over, and there isn't an expiry date for our feelings.\* Throughout the Canadian Association of Social Work webinar, Cadell emphasizes that this is one of the main myths about grief.\* Grief can change us in a profound way, and it can last a lifetime, so rushing to recover from it is an unrealistic expectation that sets us up for failure.\*

### **Why We Should Say Goodbye to the 5 Stages of Grief**

Clearly, grief is more complicated than a 5-step process divided into separate chapters, especially when we consider the expanded definition of grief to include all types of loss. There are other models about the grieving process besides the Five Stages of Grief, and they show that it is normal to go back and forth between multiple different feelings, including feeling okay one moment and feeling overwhelmed the next.\* Other models depict an undefined timeline of grieving that can last weeks, months, or years.\*

According to Cadell, the Five Stages of Grief Model should be challenged when we see it

because it can cause people to feel like they're not following the "normal" timeline or process of coping with loss.\* In general, comparing the way that we grieve to other people is unhelpful because everyone grieves things differently. To sum up, we can enjoy watching movies and TV shows that use this model as a plot device without beating ourselves up for not relating to or behaving like the characters. Enjoy watching the story, but don't use the Five Stages of Grief Model as a template for how to feel.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at [www.ontario.ca/coronavirus](http://www.ontario.ca/coronavirus). Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675

