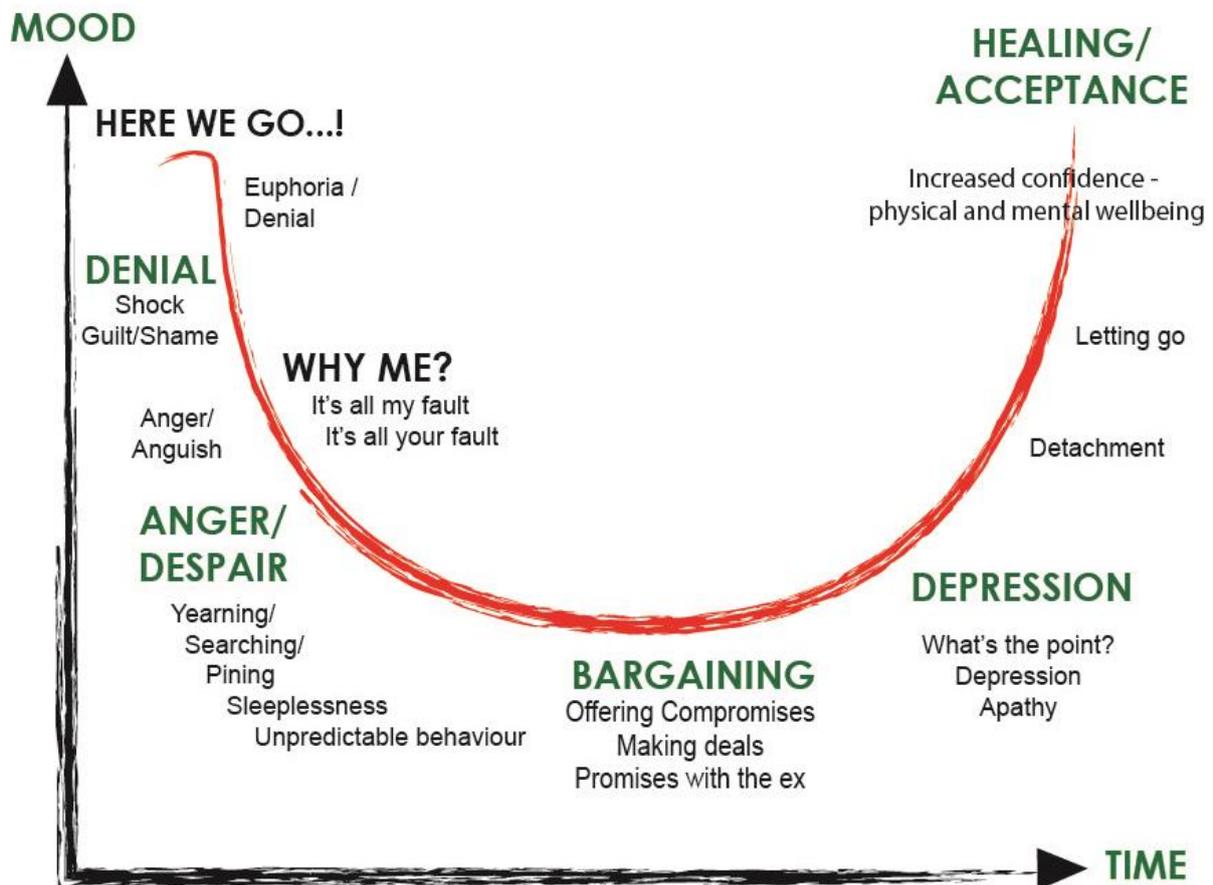


# Relationship Breakups:

## LOSS. SEPARATION, TRANSITION -

### The Grief Stages of Couple Separation Explained



*Wei Chei - the Chinese character for crisis is 'danger' (Wei) plus 'opportunity' (Chei)*

The concept that there are “stages of grief” was developed by **Elisabeth Kübler-Ross** and has been adopted by many health-care professionals worldwide. Couple separation is a painful and devastating experience. It can be extremely distressing especially when a long time has been spent with the person. The end of any long-term relationship such as that shared by a married couple or de-facto relationship can be traumatising and stressful.

Couples who have experienced a painful **relationship breakup** will often go through several stages as they cope with their loss. As the acclaimed psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross puts it, the stages of grieving chronicles how a person feels and copes during a relationship breakup.

As you read these stages, it’s important to remember that this is not a linear process where a person will go through one stage at a time. Human beings are complex and can experience many feelings at the same time or not feel some of these things at all. Think of these stages as possible feelings that may come up for you when you end a relationship.

## FIRST STAGE: DENIAL

### The feeling:

Denial is the first of the five stages of grief. It helps us to survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We go numb. We wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, why we should go on. We try to find a way to simply get through each day. Denial and shock help us to cope and make survival possible. Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. At this point, you may block unwanted feelings or turn off your emotions. There is a strong feeling of refutation that the relationship has ended, and you unwillingly hold on to the thought that the separation is just a phase. You may do everything possible to bring the relationship back to the way it was.

### How to cope:

Denial is a stage that may or may not come again even after being able to move on to the succeeding stages. It is important that there is a mutual acknowledgement between both parties about the separation. After all, acknowledging that a problem exists is the first helpful step to properly cope with the breakup. As such, it is important to convince yourself that in spite of the **relationship breakup**, there are other things that you need to prioritise like school, work or leisure.

## SECOND STAGE: ANGER

### The feeling:

Anger occurs when you finally understand that the breakup is real. Whether you are angry with yourself or furious at your ex-partner for not keeping the relationship strong, anger is a normal feeling in emotionally stressful experiences. Although sometimes people refuse to acknowledge anger, be willing to acknowledge your anger, even though it may seem endless. The more you truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more you will heal. There are many other emotions under the anger and you will get to them in time, but anger is the emotion we are most used to managing. The truth is that anger has no limits. It can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself and your loved ones.

### How to deal:

It is important to let all your emotions go, rather than keeping all negative feelings inside. Bottling them up will make you burst into rage at any time when there is a trigger. Channel your anger through different recreational activities, such as exercising, painting and singing. Counselling or therapy is another anger management strategy that you can employ. By doing counselling, you are able to truly recognise your feelings and maybe even trace the roots of your anger.

## THIRD STAGE: BARGAINING

### The feeling:

Feelings of bargaining are easily assessed during a relationship breakup. This happens when compromises are made for the benefit of rebuilding the relationship. The affected person may think about making a deal with a supernatural being, or may consider talking with the ex-partner to make promises so that things can go back to how they were before. There is a strong tendency to converse with the ex-partner about working out the many issues and concerns that led to the breakup. Oftentimes, bargaining gives a reassuring feeling that the relationship can still be mended. We will do anything not to feel the pain of this loss. We forget that the stages are responses to feelings that can last for minutes or hours as we flip in and out of one and then another. We do not enter and leave each individual stage in a linear fashion. We may feel one, then another and back again to the first one.

**How to deal:**

Find new activities to keep yourself busy. Being preoccupied with other things will keep your mind from the breakup. Instead of bargaining, try to rationalise the situation and explore why the relationship did not work out in some aspects. Recognising the reality of the problem is the key to proper coping.

**FOURTH STAGE: DEPRESSION****The feeling:**

Oftentimes when the bargaining does not work, you can fall into despair with the realisation that the relationship cannot be fixed. This stage sets in when there is a clear understanding that the relationship is indeed “over”. Extreme feelings of sadness and loneliness consume the affected person, as well as a general loss of interest in many activities of daily living. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It’s important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a loss.

**How to deal:**

Depression is the best time to use all the effective coping mechanisms, as it is during this time that you may feel extremely down. It is important to reflect on why the breakup has happened, and noting the aspects that led to the separation. Doing something new and continuing usual activities are recommended to maintain a normal living. Withdrawing yourself from the world is generally not advised, as it’s important to spend time with your loved ones to reinforce social coping. Counselling or therapy is also an effective way to express your depressed feelings.

**FIFTH STAGE: ACCEPTANCE****The feeling:**

In this final stage, there is a willingness to finally let go and move on with life. You have fully comprehended that it is normal to feel hurt, and that the **relationship breakup** brings a whole new meaning for you.

**How to deal:**

By finally accepting the whole experience, you can now be the best person you can be. Nevertheless, it’s wise to know your limits and enjoy new experiences one step at a time. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs; we move, we change, we grow, we evolve. We may start to reach out to others and become involved in their lives. We invest in our friendships and in our relationship with ourselves. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time.

## MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

Loss is a fact of life, and so are the reactions that follow, but the grief that accompanies significant loss is frequently misunderstood. Here are some of the more commonly held myths and misconceptions about grief, along with the facts to dispel them:

1 “The Five Stages of Grief are linear and must happen one right after another”

**Not True** – The same way grief is unique as our fingerprint, how the stages will occur in someone’s life is also unique to them.

2 “You must go through all of the five stages”

**Not True** – Some people never go through the anger stage. Some people are never in denial. Some never find acceptance.

3 “The five stages only occur once”

**Not True** – We often go through stages multiple times.

4 “We must follow the five stages”

**Not True** – The stages reflect where we are. What makes the principles developed by Kübler Ross so amazing and stand the test of time is – she didn’t create something, rather she identified something that naturally occurs in our behaviour after loss and change.

5 “You must have exactly one of those emotions in the five stages”

**Not True** – The stages are general emotions that contain many other emotions. For example, Denial also contains shock. Anger contains rage, bitterness and annoyance. Bargaining is the “if only’s” and the “what-if’s.” Depression contains sadness, despair, emptiness and yearning. Acceptance just means you acknowledge the reality of the loss. It does not mean you’re okay with it or you like it.