

Understanding Grief

Grief usually involves some predictable phases of normal responses to loss. These stages are not linear. You may experience some, but not all. You may not experience the stages in this order and it is common to circle back and repeat stages.

Denial

This is a stage of shock and numbness; “I can’t believe this happened!” Some do not go through a significant phase of shock and are able to express emotions immediately, while others feel numb and no emotions or tears come for a long time. This response protects us from overwhelming emotions.

Anger

Irritability and anger are normal reactions to loss. It can be surprising and uncomfortable for some, but anger needs to be felt and expressed in order to heal. It is normal for anger to be directed toward people considered responsible for the loss. You may be angry at the shooter’s family, the police, gun rights activists, and others.

Guilt

There is almost always some sense of guilt in grief. People think of the things they should have done but didn’t. You might play the “What if” game. “What if I could have stopped it? What if someone else could have stopped it?” Bargaining (“I’d do anything to undo this”) can be a coping mechanism used to avoid pain.

Depression

During this stage, one’s attention is in the present. This is when people experience the pain. Many will feel despair, unbearable loneliness, and hopelessness. These feelings may be more intense for those without a strong support group. It is important to express sadness through crying during this stage.

Acceptance

This is a phase of recognizing the permanent reality of the events and loss. This is not a feeling that what happened is okay, but that it cannot be denied and we must move forward with our lives. Eventually, you start readjusting to the environment and have a sense of resolution.