

Stages of Grief: When Teens Suffer Loss

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At-risk teens may have suffered many losses: the loss of family, home, health, friends, safety, and security. Each of these losses is associated with grief. Grief is the process of learning to cope with the feelings, emotions, behaviours, and physical reactions connected to the loss.

Five Stages of Grief

This model by Kübler-Ross (1969) is helpful. Teens will grieve differently, but knowing the stages of grief will help you to better understand the process. We will use the scenario of 9-year-old Asha. She was found abandoned and then placed into foster care.

Stage 1: Denial and Isolation

After being picked up by the police and taken to a home, Asha experiences a denial of what has happened. She thinks, "I know my mother has gone to the market, but she will be back soon. She will find me here. So I will only be in this home for a little while."

Asha feels numb. She cannot think about anything except her mother. She isolates herself emotionally and physically from everyone.

Stage 2: Anger

Asha begins to question her situation. She directs her anger toward her mother and the police. She considers them responsible for her situation.

She thinks, "I hate my mother. I hate the police for not listening to my story. I hate them for putting me in this dreadful place. These people do not like me."

Asha feels powerless. Her life is out of her control. She has headaches and stomach-aches and begins to show aggression by hitting, stealing, lying, and refusing to obey.

Stage 3: Bargaining

Asha begins to realize that anger has not solved her problems. She realizes that if she cooperates with her foster parents, her situation might improve. She thinks, "If I behave better, the police will go to the shops and find my mother."

Asha now has a sense of hope, so she tries to behave as well as she can. She cooperates, eats all her meals, and makes friends with the neighbourhood children.

Stage 4: Depression

The bargaining has not brought her mother to rescue her, so Asha is now feeling despair. She thinks, "Where is my mother? I am really alone in this world."

Asha experiences intense feelings of sadness. She appears listless, does not want to play, and is often found on her bed crying.

Stage 5: Acceptance

In the acceptance stage, the reality is now obvious. Asha thinks, "The situation is not going to change. I am staying here. I do like my foster mother. She is kind. I need to adjust and try to be part of the family."

Asha's behaviour improves, and her emotions stabilize. This admission is the beginning of her healing.

The Role of Caregivers

Caregivers can play an important role in helping grieving teens to heal. By understanding the stages of grief, sharing in their pain, encouraging them to express their feelings, teaching them to manage their behaviours, and showing love and concern, you can help to lessen their long-term trauma.