

Paths of Grief

Grief. *The natural human response to loss.* Active grief is a healing process that produces a new picture of our lives after suffering a loss.

Paths of grieving: *Transition. Active grieving. Transformation.*

Loss brings about the grief response. Grieving attempts to connect us with our deeper self, which can sometimes be obscured by layers of denial and survival defenses built up within the personality. We rarely stop to notice these layers if things are going well. It is when losses come and the pain of the loss causes us to look within. This dynamic (of looking within) is another way of describing the nature of grief work. There are powerful over-lapping reactions or phases that are initiated by grief, beginning with shock and denial. As the initial denial subsides the mission of the *adapted* child is exposed because the loss means that the mission has failed. With the failure of the *adapted* child's mission comes another reaction. We fall back into the unprotected world of the *hurt* child. We are once again suffering with pain we cannot fully explain and are at a crossroads within. Do we turn to the failed *adapted* child and somehow recreate the mission? Or do we turn in another direction? Do we turn to the adult that we have become (and are becoming) and find new answers that are beyond the *adapted* child's grasp?

Transition. This part of the path is characterized by denial and anxiety, and an attempt to make the grief go away by restoring the *adapted* child's mission and plans. Transition ends when denial no longer helps to control the problem. Anxiety is no longer contained by the denial defense system. There are (3) paths associated with transition:

- Intense pain and inner turmoil of grieving
- Dissociation escape
- Acting-out escape

The *adapted* self will not just give up. The grief-stricken person will try these paths, switching back and forth between them in the struggle. But at some point a commitment to one of them is made.

Active grieving. When the suffering person finds their way to the first path (intense pain and inner turmoil) and stays there, the work of active grieving can proceed. Active grieving involves the difficult process of engaging with emotional pain (or “the feeling states of grief”). It is a process of switching between depression, guilt, anger and fear—which are the core feeling states of active grief. At this point in the journey the grieving person has entered the domain of the *hurt* child. The usual defensive skills of the *adapted* child are gone. It is often a time of immense wrestling with the big questions of life. It is out of this struggle that key tasks are worked through (facing core assumption about life and self, trying to connect personal meaning to a life in disarray and learning that the *hurt* child doesn't have the answers you really need). Active grieving is about turning away from the *hurt* child's explanations to the understanding and strength of the *adult self*. This is a profound developmental achievement.

Transformation. The core task of transformation is to empower the *adult self* within. The result is growth and freedom to live life, not just survive life. Losses in life cannot be helped. We cannot go back to a time when everything was “all better” no matter how hard the *hurt* child wishes for it. Life presses us on, ready or not. Grieving successfully helps us to make the necessary changes. We *can* separate from a lost dream even when it feels like a part of us has been torn away. Transformation is the process that heals the emotional loss and helps us to accept new answers to life's challenges. The adult has the power to accept loss, to forgive and be forgiven and can then integrate that loss into the self meaningfully, staying true the themselves in the process—free to live life authentically.