

STAGES OF GRIEF AFTER LOSING A BREAST

Anticipatory Grief

Grief is an unfolding process that consists of five basic stages. We start the grieving process as soon as we learn that a mastectomy is a possibility and continue grieving long after the surgery is over. Grief for an impending loss is referred to as anticipatory grief.

Stage 1 – Denial



before emotion floods in.

When we first experience loss we go into the denial stage, during which we may feel shock, disbelief, and numbness. The denial stage is nature's way of cushioning us from the bluntness of reality. Denial allows us to gradually absorb the painful truth. Many women who have grieved the loss of a breast describe their response in the denial stage as hearing the information the doctor is telling them as though the physician is talking about someone else. They find themselves thinking that cancer and mastectomies happen to other people, not them. This response can give you time to intellectually attend to the details, such as making appointments with the surgeon and oncologist,

Stage 2 – Protest



others as we try to make sense of the loss. Anger at God, our doctors, or the relatives who passed on the bad genes is very common during the protest stage. Besides feeling the need to direct our anger at someone; it is also common to engage in unrealistic mental bargaining, such as promising to go to church every Sunday if our breast is spared. This bargaining is a combination of denial and our need to feel that we have some control over the situation. During this time, it is also common to experience physical symptoms from stress, such as diarrhea, constipation, neck and shoulder pain, rest-less sleep, and fatigue. Your stomach may ache or you may find yourself with a splitting headache that makes it hard to think. Your body may seem to be screaming out a message of emotional pain

As our initial shock wears off we move into the protest stage, a phase of intense emotion, including anger, sadness, and confusion. As the facts start to sink in, our thoughts set off an emotional reaction. Our fear of surgery and of cancer is probably foremost in our minds. Before we are even sure we have cancer, we often start to think about dying and leaving our loved ones behind. We feel sad for our kids, our partner, and ourselves. We often feel betrayed and angry with our body. My clients consistently ask me what they did to deserve breast cancer. This is the time during which we tend to blame ourselves or

Stage 3 – Disorientation



The third stage of grief is the disorientation stage. This stage is often accompanied by restlessness, confusion, and **depression**, as we have to change our routines and adjust to the changes the mastectomy has brought. We may also continue to experience the physical symptoms of stress during this stage. Disorientation is very natural after your chest has healed enough to begin to wear more normal clothes and you are feeling strong enough to go out in public. You can't just go to your closet and pick out an outfit like before. Throwing on a **bra** and a T-shirt is not an option at this point. Now, selecting an outfit means

finding a top that your tender chest and restricted arm can tolerate, plus finding a way to fill in the missing breast. You have lost a breast, the freedom to wear a variety of clothes, the movement in your arm, trust in your body, some of your sexuality, restful sleep, and physical comfort, to name a few of your many losses. And even though most of these losses are temporary or become easier with time, making the adjustment to them is likely to cause you to feel confused and disoriented.

Stage 4 – Detachment



Following the disorientation stage we move into the detachment stage. During this stage we tend to isolate and withdraw ourselves, and possibly feel resigned and apathetic. It is as though we have to go off quietly by ourselves and sit with our loss. Too much contact with other people at this time often feels like an intrusion and a lot of work. We often feel we need to be left alone in our misery to fully absorb our loss and get used to the fact that a mastectomy has forever changed our life.

Stage 5 – Resolution



The last stage of grief is resolution and it is during this stage that we enter a renewed state of reorganization and acceptance. We are not happy about the loss or our breast, but we see that we can live without it. The resolution stage often brings us insight into our life and ourselves that builds character and produce wisdom. During the resolution stage our mood lifts and we find we are able to experience joy again. This is also a time when we become grateful for what we have and want to give back. Volunteerism, such as in breast cancer support organizations, frequently accompanies this last stage of grief. If

you give yourself the room to go through the emotions, you will move forward into the resolution stage of grief where you begin to feel acceptance. You will want to take back control of your life by becoming pro-active again. Priorities become redefined and life goals are reestablished. Your overall reaction may actually be a blend of loss and gain. Initially it may have felt like a horrible loss but, as you move through the process, you discover some advantages that come along with your body changes.

By Becky Zuckweiler

Becky Zuckweiler, MS, RN, is the author of *Living in the Post-Mastectomy Body* (Hartley & Marks Publishers, Inc., 1998), and herself underwent a double mastectomy. Out of her own experience she developed a comprehensive program for the postmastectomy woman that includes a guide to surgery and its aftermath, exercises for regaining flexibility and strength, as well as an understanding of the psychological effects of this surgery, and how to navigate them.

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