

Counseling and the Grief Process

Individuals facing loss of any kind will go through a range of emotional reactions before they are able to accept the loss. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross first identified a five step process leading to acceptance of death in people who are terminally ill. This process is referred to as the grief process. Today there are many mental health professionals who believe that all therapy and healing is related to dealing with loss of some kind. For an individual losing the ability to hear, whether totally or partially, suddenly or progressively over time, there is a substantial loss of functioning to be accepted. This acceptance will not come all at once and may not come at all. Communication is our identity – who we are. Understanding the five stages of the grief process will help individuals dealing with a hearing loss and will also help counselors to assist consumers through their healing.

Denial

The first stage of the grief process is denial. In order to numb the pain of loss, individuals may refuse to accept or acknowledge reality. Anxiety and fear are at work in the denial state. Reactions are varied but may include:

- Complete refusal to believe the loss is occurring
- Minimization of the loss
- Avoidance
- Denial of feelings

Counselors may meet consumers in this stage if they are referred by a family member or a physician to vocational rehabilitation (VR). Persons who are totally denying their hearing loss will rarely seek help on their own. This may be the consumer who claims he or she really has no problem or that it will go away. This consumer may say there would be no problem if people would only speak up or "talk plain." There are many layers of denial. Some individuals may acknowledge the hearing loss but minimize the effects, saying "Oh, I get by just fine." At this point in the process the individual may not realize that he or she is slowly withdrawing from activities he or she once enjoyed or conversation with his or her family. If he or she does notice behavioral changes, he or she will probably not attribute them to hearing loss. He or she might claim he or she's just not interested any more or too busy. Some consumers believe that a sudden onset hearing deafness will disappear as quickly and suddenly as it appeared, saying "Things will be alright tomorrow."

When denial is occurring, it's not because the individual is being stubborn or ignorant although family members and friends might think so, saying "He refuses to get help. Why does he have to be so stubborn?" Denial is a mechanism that protects us from information that is too disturbing to know. With time the layers of denial will gently peel away or may be shaken loose by an event that precipitates the next stage in the grief process.

Anger

When a long denied truth is faced, anger may surface. In this stage trust and faith may be shaken. The individual may attempt to blame everyone, from him or herself to the doctor, God and maybe even his or her vocational rehabilitation counselor for his loss. The anger is not necessarily justified but it is there. It may be expressed in ways that are reasonable or not so reasonable. It may appear as mild aggravation or violent rage. At the core is the question, "Why me?" and the realization that it's just not fair.

Counselors or significant others confronting a person who has denied a hearing loss or its impact will likely face an angry reaction. They must be prepared to deal with the after effects because the individual is rarely ready to move from denial to acceptance without ranting and raving in between. Working with consumers who are experiencing a great deal of anger can be puzzling and frustrating for the VR counselor.

What is important is to recognize the difference between anger that is a natural part of healing and that which has hardened over time into bitterness and suspicion. Individuals stuck in the anger stage of grieving may need professional help through therapy as part of the VR program. The VR counselor will need to acknowledge his or her own limitations in dealing with this aspect of counseling. It is also critical to provide for accessible communication in all meetings with the consumer to avoid further frustration and anger.

Bargaining

In this stage of facing a hearing loss, individuals try to prevent the effects of the loss by negotiation. They will make deals with God, themselves and others. Some of these negotiations may be reasonable and productive. For example, "If I try closed captioning, I may not have to give up understanding speech on TV", or "If I use a hearing aid, I may learn to understand my wife again." Other bargains may not be so reasonable: "If I could stop sinning, God would restore my hearing."

In the bargaining stage people often do seek help on their own. They may turn to VR to help them to prevent the loss of a job as a result of the hearing loss. Counseling for job retention and job analysis would be important considerations for counselors working with these individuals.

Depression

The depression phase is the acknowledgement and grieving of the loss. When the individual comes to the full realization that no matter what he or she does, he or she will live with a hearing loss, he or she is likely to experience some level of depression. This may be sadness or debilitating depression including suicidal thinking/attempts. This is a very painful phase and may interfere with a VR consumer's efforts toward his or her vocational goal. When a consumer

appears to give up, fails to keep appointments or talks about sadness or depression, a counselor is wise to explore further the reason for the behavior or the extent of the grief.

Acceptance

Only after the denial, anger, negotiation and sadness can an individual find peace with the way things are. There is no longer a struggle around the hearing loss. It becomes an acceptable part of the individual's life.

The grief process, also referred to as the healing or forgiveness process, is not necessarily a well-ordered, sequential schedule of emotional reactions. Individuals react with different levels of intensity, on different time tables, and in different order of the stages outlined here. One person may jump from anger to depression with denial entering again and again at different stages. Another might vacillate between depression and acceptance for extended periods of time. Some may feel they have worked through the entire process only to find themselves back at the beginning and starting all over again. What is important to note is that everyone will face some sort of loss at some time in their life and will experience these reactions in one form or another.

The obvious application to hearing loss is highly relative in working with individuals who are hard of hearing or late deafened. For a better understanding of consumers' needs, an appreciation of the process that leads to acceptance is essential.