

Children's Center

A place where healing begins

Steps to Healing for Caregivers: The Grief Process

However you heard about the sexual abuse of your child, your first feeling may have been disbelief, even verging on shock. The emotions you as a caregiver go through after learning about the abuse of your child are very similar to the feelings of grief connected with a loved one's death or with the end of a special relationship. Other family members will also experience varying degrees and stages of grief. It is important for you to work through these stages so that you can heal and can assist your family members in healing, too. What follows is the detailed grief process that seems to be a common experience for most caregivers.

The basic stages of grief are:

1. Denial and Shock
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Guilt and Depression
5. Acceptance

Stage One: Denial and Shock. Denial serves to defend against intolerable pain until it can be tolerated bit by bit. When you first learn about the abuse, as a parent you will often listen carefully, ask fairly clear questions and appear calm. Inside, however, you may be attempting to substitute in your mind what you would *rather* have heard for what you are *actually* being told. For example, when Scott told his dad, Bill, that Scott's camp leader had touched Scott inappropriately, Bill listened and responded appropriately. Yet in Bill's mind he was thinking that what Scott said could possibly be in Scott's imagination, because Bill had such a positive image of the camp leader.

While you are feeling shock, you might find yourself:

- Calling several people, including professionals, to ask if they really think your child's story is true.
- Experiencing alternating feelings about your child's story: shock when you visualize what you've been told and denial when you think about what a nice person the accused offender appears to be.
- Feeling strongly that you want to keep the information from family members and friends.
- Being tempted to question your child over and over about what s/he has reported (Don't).
- Needing to find out all the information you can about sexual abuse and abusers.
- Wanting to take your child and leave the community.
- Feeling like it's all a bad dream, and that when you wake up tomorrow you'll discover it never happened.

Those most likely to be "stuck" in denial are those closest to the offender. Denial can sound like minimization ("I'm sure he was just roughhousing/tickling her and he accidentally touched her private."). Denial can also sound like blaming the victim ("I can't imagine why she would say such terrible things about her cousin."), or blaming the victim's family ("Her mother wants custody and she's putting the child up to saying these things.").

Stage Two: Anger. As Bill began to accept the fact that Scott's camp leader actually touched Scott sexually, he began to feel rage. He felt betrayed; his trust in the camp leader was violated. Bill's belief system about what was good for his son was badly shaken. He had been so sure that the camping experience would be a valuable one for Scott. Bill wanted to see the camp leader in jail - forever.

Prepared by the Children's Center

www.childrenscenter.cc

For additional information contact Family Support at the Children's Center, 503-655-7725.

Source: Adapted from When Your Child Has Been Molested by Kathryn Hagans and Joyce Case and the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

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Other parents have reacted in similar ways. One father shared that if his wife had not asked him for his hunting rifle, he is afraid he could have shot the suspect. The father wanted to kill the suspect because he had taken away his child's innocence. Anger can move around and be directed at the offender, at God, at self, even at the child, and at "the system," etc.

While you are feeling anger, you might find yourself:

- Calling the investigators and telling them they aren't doing their jobs properly or quickly enough.
- Fighting with family members about everything.
- Trying to place blame on family members or others (or yourself) for what has happened.
- Expecting the counselor to be angry FOR you, and to be able to quickly fix things.
- Threatening to harm the suspect or his/her family.
- Going to the newspapers and demanding that the suspect be jailed immediately.

Stage Three: Bargaining. You may attempt to "bargain away" the abuse, to try to undo it and to move quickly back into normal activities. In this stage, you as a caregiver try to make the whole situation go away in your mind. This is where the "what ifs" and the "if only's" come in: "If only I hadn't worked that night," or "If only I hadn't married him." Other examples: "What if I had come home early like I had planned to."

When you realize that there is nothing you can do to undo what has happened, you may become over-busy with other activities, projects, or sports. "I must be okay, because I'm too busy to think about what happened" is what you are unconsciously saying to yourself. Unfortunately, families can get stuck in the bargaining stage as parents try to go back to their family's previous lifestyle. If you find yourself involved in bargaining and don't recognize what you're trying to do, complete healing within your family may never occur. It is not recommended that, instead, you sit at home and brood about this awful thing that has happened, but *do* make yourself admit that the abuse *did* happen, and that it *has* had effects on your family.

In this stage, Bill felt he would be able to create enough activity within the family so that Scott would forget what had happened to him. On top of an already busy schedule, Bill tried to fit in extra fishing trips, family outings, more movies, and generally more of everything.

What behaviors are common in the Bargaining Stage of the grief process? If you try to fill your life with superficial activity to block the unpleasant thoughts about what has happened, you might realize you are:

- Resisting going to counseling by canceling appointments.
- Being overly attentive to your child's needs and wants, feeling that will erase or make up for what happened.
- Resisting discussion within your family of the abuse and the problems it has caused.
- Busying yourself in unnecessary activity so there is less time to think about what happened.
- Demanding that family members "tough it out" or show super-human displays of non-emotion, and labeling or minimizing your feelings about the abuse. A father may think of himself as a "sissy" if he cries; the mother feels she is "hysterical" if she's upset. These labels can keep you from facing your underlying feelings.

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Stage Four: Guilt and Depression. Some professionals say that depression is anger you feel toward others, but instead direct at yourself. By nature of their roles, parents can be the most guilt-ridden people in the world. Bill experienced tremendous guilt because he felt he had not protected Scott. Scott's mother, Joan, felt that her nurturing of Scott had left him too naive.

Another parent tells her reaction, based on her feelings of guilt and depression:
"I would look at my child and sob. She was so innocent. I just knew I had done everything wrong in my parenting for this to have happened."

As a parent, you may place the blame on yourself, feeling guilty for whatever has happened to your child. Depression follows because the abuse has already taken place *and you turn your anger at what has happened away from the abuser and back on yourself*. Let's face it. When good things happen to your children, as a parent you tend to feel proud. And when bad things happen, you feel responsible. It is important to remember that if there is no offender, there is no abuse. Child sexual abuse is a choice and the offender is always the one at fault.

When you are angry at yourself and feel guilty, you might:

- Indulge in negative habits (smoking, drinking, eating, etc.) to excess.
- Withdraw from other family members or friends, either physically or by not communicating.
- Want to sleep a lot.
- Be unable to sleep.
- Experience other physical symptoms: headaches, upset stomach, vomiting, and so on.
- Cry more easily and more often than usual.
- Become absent minded, forgetting everyday things because you are so preoccupied with the abuse and your guilt.
- Feel an urgency to do things as a family that you've been meaning to do but have not done until now.
- Attempt to isolate the family from friends and extended family members.
- Doubt your ability to make appropriate decisions.

Prolonged depression with no periods of lighter mood and/or any self-harm thoughts or plans are signs to seek immediate professional help.

Stage Five: Acceptance. Acceptance can come. Acceptance does not mean forgetting, but it means that you no longer feel all the stages so intensely. Acceptance means that there are other things in life to focus on and that life can go on. When you have accepted that the sexual abuse occurred, have not minimized it, have not exaggerated it, and have dealt with it in a healthy manner - usually with the assistance of a counselor - you are in the stage of acceptance. It may take a few months or several years to reach this stage. Individual family members may reach acceptance at different times.

By recognizing the fact that you must go through various stages of the grief process, you, like Bill and Joan and their son, Scott, are working toward acceptance. Your stages (just as theirs) may not occur in the sequence listed here; and just when you think you are beyond one stage, old feelings may come back to remind you that there is still work to be done with some phase you thought you had already passed through.

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You may even skip a stage. That does not mean you are doing something wrong. If you do not feel a great deal of guilt, you may simply know that you had no logical way of preventing what happened. If you did not feel the necessity to try to bargain, you are saying you are ready to work at dealing openly with the family hurt - not trying to be so busy that you try to forget it.

These stages assist in the healing process. For instance, when you feel angry, you can let yourself experience the anger without acting on it in an unhealthy way. You may feel as though you really want to physically hurt the offender, and acknowledge that feeling without actually doing anything harmful. You may write letters you never mail, or scream and cry in a place where you feel safe and where your child cannot hear you. You may work out at a health club or take a brisk walk.

Recognize these stages as a normal response to the abuse of your child. Take comfort in reminding yourself that these painful feelings will not stay with you forever unless you deny their existence and refuse to work through them. See these stages as building blocks for your recovery and the healing of your family.

Grief Work Sheet

Studies show that the emotions we as caregivers go through after learning about abuse of a child we love are very similar to the feelings of grief connected with a loved one's death or with the end of a special relationship. Grief is saying good-bye to the "old normal" and finding a "new normal" and way of being happy again. Grief is an active process and very individual. Couples will often grieve differently from one another and may not be available to adequately support one another. We are not victims to our grief. We have choices about how we grieve. There may be some days when we wake up and we recognize strong feelings of sadness or anger and we just can't seem to shake the feelings. On such a day, we may just accept the feelings and recognize that to feel these feelings is to be moving forward in our grief. On another day, we may awaken and recognize we need to take a break from our grief process and think about other things for a change.

Acceptance can come. Acceptance doesn't mean forgetting, but it means that we no longer feel all the stages so intensely. Acceptance means that there are other things in life to focus on and that life can go on; that we and our families can be happy again.

Observe yourself and learn to recognize your individual grief process. Give examples of your responses to the following grief stages. Identify where you are in the grief process by circling the stage(s) you are currently working on.

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Stage 1: Shock and Denial:

When I first learned about the abuse, I recognized I was numb with shock when:

How I tried to tell myself that the abuse didn't really happen (denial):

Stage 2: Anger:

During my grief process, I have felt angry toward:

Other feelings I have experienced besides anger:

Stage 3: Bargaining Stage: ("What if, if only..." This is where guilt often surfaces)

Ways that I have tried bargaining away the abuse, to try to undo (in my mind and with activities) what happened:

I know that only the offender is responsible for the abuse, but I have felt guilty about:

Stage 4: Depression:

Signs I have recognized in myself that perhaps indicate depression:

Stage 5: Acceptance: (Acceptance means that you no longer feel all the stages of grief so intensely)

I knew I was close to acceptance when:

(If you haven't reached acceptance yet) I think I will be close to acceptance when: