



Steps to Healing for Caregivers: The Grief Process

When parents and caregivers first hear about the sexual abuse of their child, their first feeling may be disbelief, even verging on shock. The emotions parents go through after learning about the abuse of their children are very similar to the feelings of grief connected with loss or with the end of a special relationship. 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 1: Denial and Shock

Denial serves to defend against intolerable pain until it can be tolerated bit by bit. When parents first learn about the abuse, they will often listen carefully, ask fairly clear questions and appear calm. Inside, however, caregivers may be attempting to substitute in their mind what they would rather have heard for what they are actually being told.

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."
- Blaming the victim: "I can't imagine why she would say such terrible things about her cousin."
- Blaming the victim's family: "Her mother wants custody and she's putting the child up to saying these things."

When parents are feeling shock, they may:

- Call several people, including professionals, to ask if they think what the child said is true.
- Experience alternating feelings about what their child said: shock when they visualize what they've been told and denial when they think about what kind of person the accused offender appears to be.
- Feel strongly that they want to keep the information from family members and friends.
- Be tempted to question their child over and over about what he or she has reported.
- Want to take their child and leave the community.
- Feeling like it's all a bad dream, and that when they wake up tomorrow they'll discover it never happened.

Stage 2: Anger

Parents react in various ways. One 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 caregivers are feeling anger, they might find themselves:

- 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 themselves) for what has happened.
- Expecting the counselor to be angry too, and to be able to quickly fix things.
- Threatening to harm the suspect or his or her family.
- Going to the newspapers and demanding that the suspect be jailed immediately.

Stage 3: Bargaining

As a caregiver, you may attempt to “bargain away” the abuse, to try to undo it and to move quickly back into normal activities. In this stage, caregivers try to make the whole situation go away in their mind. This is where the “what ifs” and the “if onlys” come in: “If only I hadn’t worked that night,” or “If only I hadn’t married him,” or “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 caregivers are unconsciously saying to themselves. 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 accept that the abuse happened, and that it has effects on your family.

Common Behaviors in the Bargaining Stage of the grief process:

- Resisting going to counseling by canceling appointments.
- Being overly attentive to your child’s needs and wants, feeling as if 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.

Stage 4: Guilt and Depression

Some professionals say that depression is anger we feel toward others, but instead direct at ourselves. By nature of their roles, parents can be the most guilt-ridden people in the world. A parent’s reactions may be based on their feelings of guilt and depression: “I would look at my child and sob. She was so innocent. I just knew I had done something 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. When bad things happen to our children, we 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 caregivers are angry with themselves and feel guilty, they 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.
- Cry more easily and more often than usual.
- Become absent minded, forgetting everyday things.
- Feel an urgency to do things as a family that they've been meaning to do.
- Attempt to isolate the family from friends and extended family members.
- Doubt their 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 5: Acceptance

Acceptance can come. Acceptance does not mean forgetting or forgiving. Acceptance means that what happened no longer controls your life and 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 are working toward acceptance. Your stages 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. You may even skip a stage and that is normal too.

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.

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