

THE STAGES OF DYING

According to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, people experience clearly defined stages in coming to terms with death. A Swiss psychiatrist, who has led the way to a deeper understanding of the needs of dying individuals, Doctor Ross describes these stages in her book, "ON DEATH AND DYING".

1. **DENIAL** - "NO, NOT ME". This is a typical reaction when a person first learns that he/she is terminally ill. Dr. Ross feels that denial is important and necessary. It helps cushion the impact of the person's awareness that death is inevitable.
2. **ANGER** - "WHY ME?" The patient resents the fact that others will remain healthy and alive while he or she must die. Or the anger may be "old" and part of one's "unfinished business." Dr. Ross emphasizes the importance of allowing individuals to express their anger in safe and healing ways.
3. **BARGAINING** - "YES ME, BUT...". Individuals accept the fact of death but strike bargains, usually with God, for more time. They promise to be good or to do something in exchange for another week, month or year.
4. **DEPRESSION** - "YES, ME.". The individual now begins to consider what they are losing with the loss of life. First they mourn past losses; things left undone, wrongs committed. Then they enter a state of "preparatory grief". They stop mourning all the "small deaths" and begin to conceive of the final death. They mourn the things that will never be. This is a "grief beyond words".
5. **ACCEPTANCE** - "MY TIME IS VERY CLOSE NOW AND IT IS ALL RIGHT."
This stage is not one of resignation but one of "accepting what you cannot change with a sense of peace and serenity". It is a time almost devoid of feeling - a "letting go". Dr. Ross notes that not everyone dies in a state of acceptance. The key is having another human being near you who cares unconditionally.

These stages are merely guidelines to help families and medical personnel understand some of the normal feelings dying individuals may be experiencing. Not everyone goes through all these stages and some individuals experience these stages in different order. Nonetheless, knowledge of these stages can help us become an aid rather than a hindrance in enabling the person to achieve the kind of death he/she wishes. "Some want to go out fighting," says Dr. Ross, "and they should. " Others may choose not to fight. We should not try to impose our will on them. If you listen to the patient, they will tell you how they want to die."