

# Chapter 5: Coping

In the early days of Stage 5 All-Consuming Grief, you are in survival mode. Everything else in life fades away as you focus on your loss and the devastating pain. You bow out of all other responsibilities so you can concentrate on breathing and thinking and not much of anything else. Your coping during this time will be automatic and without much thought. It will likely be based on patterns that you've already developed, that are now heightened. In addition to leaning on previous habits that you've used to cope; you may find yourself reaching for things that you haven't relied on before. You are looking for relief. The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of coping is "to deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties." You are in an intense state of dealing with difficulty.

Just like reaching for an Advil is a habit that a lot of people use to deal with physical pain, there are many habits that you've developed over the years to deal with emotional pain. In extreme stress these habits are accentuated because you are reaching for this learned relief repeatedly to lessen the pain and help you cope. These changes in daily patterns may include sleeping more or less, eating more or less, or drinking or using other substances to numb the pain.

## Post Traumatic Growth

As mentioned before, your grief is normal. It's your natural response to a loss. And grief is hard. It doesn't feel good. It's constrictive and painful. As much as you want to, you can't escape it; it follows you everywhere. Even though grief is common, it is broadly misunderstood. Because of that misunderstanding, we often think there is a right way and wrong way to grieve. You judge yourself and your response to loss and grief, and you may judge others as well. You may see others and think, he's too stoic or she's too emotional or shouldn't she be over it by now. Much of this judgment comes from fear. It doesn't feel good to feel bad, so you fear that there is something wrong with you or with your partner or anyone else that is grieving. You fear you won't survive the pain. You fear those around you won't either.

It's comforting to know that post traumatic growth is much more likely than post-traumatic stress. In an article by Lorna Collier for the American Psychological Association she wrote, "Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is a theory that explains this kind of transformation following trauma. It was developed by psychologists Richard Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, in the mid-1990s, and holds that people who endure psychological struggle following adversity can often see positive growth afterward. 'People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life,' says Tedeschi."

You're on the path of positive growth. It certainly doesn't feel like that some or most days, but you're here and you're paying attention. Growth is happening even when you don't recognize it.

## Misunderstanding the 5 Stages of Grief

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work with the terminally ill was instrumental in influencing the medical community to see the patient with more compassion. After interviewing hundreds of terminally ill patients, she discovered a pattern of common emotions. These common emotions were denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Her book [On Death and Dying](#) was a result of her work with these patients. She explained that these are not the only emotions they felt and not all individuals expressed all these feelings, but these were the shared emotions that were most often present and so therefore they were worth our awareness.

Unfortunately, Dr. Kübler-Ross's model has been widely misunderstood and has been accepted by popular culture as the definitive model of grief with little knowledge of the origin and application of her research. You may have had someone say to you, "oh, you're in the anger stage of grief." These types of statements reflect our desire for order and explanation, yet they are not helpful. They tend to oversimplify your experience and can cause you to feel like something has gone wrong when your grief isn't simple.

Kübler-Ross never intended for the stages to be viewed as a linear path and yet that is the way that people have tried to apply it. Furthermore, as grief researcher Kenneth J. Doka observed, "Kübler-Ross originally saw these stages as reflecting how people cope with illness and dying, not as reflections of how people grieve."

This is important to keep in mind. The book she co-authored with David Kessler On Grief and Grieving was published after Kübler-Ross's death and overlaid the framework of On Death and Dying to explain our reactions to loss. Her work is extremely valuable in giving the terminally ill, those who grieve and those who support them more understanding of the emotions and experiences of loss, but it is not comprehensive. If your grief does not fit the 5 Stages of Grief, you are not alone. Think of the 5 Stages of Grief as a list of *possible* emotions you may feel in grief but not as prescribed steps you must follow.

## Questions to Consider

- How does better understanding the 5 stages of grief, it's origin and its application change the way you view your grief?

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## Grief Myths

In addition to the confusion about the 5 stages of grief. There are many other myths about grief that need to be addressed. These myths develop because of misunderstanding about the grief process and our human nature to try to make sense of something that so often doesn't make sense. As you consider all the misinformation about grief, remember that your friend and family who love you are also operating with these false ideas, and they may try to help by sharing them with you. Understanding the truth will assist you in your grieving and your coping.

Common grief myths:

***If you feel like you're going crazy, you are.*** A traumatic loss is an emotional injury. It knocks us off balance and you can feel like you're going crazy. It's not uncommon to have crazy thoughts and for things to not make sense. Just because you feel like you're going crazy it doesn't mean you are. Of course, if you have concerns, consult a medical professional.

***If you keep their belongings or pictures you're stuck.*** Every loss is different, and this may not apply to you but if you've lost a loved one, having their belongings or pictures can give you comfort and allow you the time and space to adjust to their not physically being there. There is no right time to let go of their belongings and no right or wrong answer to how long you keep them.

When Carrie and David died, because of the circumstances of our family's life and needing to reclaim the space, I cleaned out their things fairly soon. I chose those items I wanted to keep, and I let go of the rest.

You may choose to do this in stages. You may put some things away and later decide that you're ready to let them go. Or you may leave their things out for a long time. It's a personal choice.

***Keep yourself distracted with work, school etc., to get through the pain.***

Distractions are just that – distractions. You can't always be sitting in the pain of grief, but you may find yourself working really long hours or overindulging in entertainment to avoid the pain. This may provide relief in the interim but it's not a long-term solution.

***There's a right way to grieve.*** There are three main patterns of grief and mourning. The first is the intuitive pattern which is characterized by expression and emotion. This style is stereotyped as a female expression. While there's a preference to intuitive grieving in women, not all women grieve this way and men can grieve this way also.

The second grief pattern is instrumental which is characterized by action and cognition. This is the person that works things out in their head and takes physical action to figure things out. This is commonly associated as a male expression; however, each pattern is seen in men and women.

The third pattern is blended which as the name implies is a blend of the intuitive and instrumental patterns. When you watch people grieve differently than you do, you may feel that you are doing it wrong, or you may feel like they are doing it wrong. Consider that neither of you are doing it wrong; you're just doing it differently.

***The first year is the hardest.*** Everyone has an idea about what's harder - the first year or the second year or some other time. Studies show that the first six months is the hardest based on the criteria that they researched. However, each phase of grief offers its own challenges. Thinking the first year is the hardest may cause you to think that you should be over it after a year. Your experience is your own and thinking that you should be doing better than you are just causes more pain.

***Give people space.*** People often run with this belief. They think they are doing grievers a favor by giving them their space. If you're the one grieving this can add to your pain as you sense that others are giving you space – space you may or may not have asked for. As hard as it is, refrain from taking it personally if others move further away instead of closer to you. They likely feel inadequate to help and they have been taught to give you space. Unfortunately, you may also be running on the belief that you must isolate yourself in order to heal first before engaging with others or to protect others around you from your sadness. Your feelings are valid, and you do not need to feel that you should grieve alone. Continue to reach out to family and friends, and allow them to be a part of your journey as much as they are willing and able to.

***Time heals all wounds or paradoxically, you will carry this grief for the rest of your life.*** The idea that time heals our emotional wounds is universal. Yes, time is an element of healing, but it is not the only element. Remember the story of breaking my foot in college. Time was an element of healing the physical injury but to heal properly I also sought the appropriate help and then I followed protocols to aid me in healing. Time doesn't heal our wounds, it's what we do with the time that helps us to heal. Sadly, too many people wait and wait for time to heal them and then give up because it hasn't happened, and they don't know what to do about it.

Ironically, you may also hear the myth that you must carry your grief with you the rest of your life. This is most often offered when someone suffers the death of someone who is very close to them – i.e., a child, spouse, or parent – or when the death is particularly tragic – i.e., a suicide, sudden death or death of a young person. The idea that you must carry your grief with you forever is becoming more and more prominent. In this paradigm, they illustrate the pain of grief and suggest that over time the quality of the grief will change, and the pain will lessen.

You will build around the grief and create a new life to cocoon the grief in order to carry it better. This is Dr. Lois Tomkin’s Model of Grief.

The Hope Model of Healing goes one step further. Once you have built the strength to carry the pain, you can choose to address the pain and heal it. It’s not required to continue to carry the pain indefinitely. Of course, the loss will always be a part of your life, and once you’ve healed your grief you may still have moments of sadness, but it’s not necessary to carry the pain of grief forever. In fact, doing so can affect your work, your ambitions, and even your health.

During heavy grief, it’s difficult to imagine that grief won’t always be there and so people will say that this is their lot in life. This perpetuates the idea that we are destined to live with grief forever. People become resigned to the idea. Unfortunately, when you hear this enough you will start to believe that forever grief is your fate too. Consider where this message is originating and remember that so many including myself have recovered from the pain of grief.

## Questions to Consider

1. Which grief myths do you connect with the most? How do you feel about changing your belief around these myths?

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# Your Grief is Unique

It's not useful to compare your loss experience to someone else's even within the same household or among those who experienced the same loss. And as previously addressed grief styles differ.

As the all-consuming grief starts to lessen, you will find that you have more control and more reasoning power again. When your grief starts to feel a little more manageable you may look back on your experience with Level 5 All-Consuming Grief and feel badly about the way you handled your experience. Remember, you were doing the best you could. You are all always doing the best you can. Practice self-compassion. When you know better, you can learn to do better. But just knowing isn't enough, it's about integrating what you know through intention and practice.

Right now, you may have thoughts like "I shouldn't drink so much." Or "All of this eating has caused me to put on 20 pounds." Or "I'm spending too much time playing video games." These thoughts are tricky. They feel useful because you are recognizing that some of these habits are not for your highest good, but these thoughts are very judgmental. Instead of creating the change you desire, they are adding to the pain that you are already facing.

You are uncomfortable because of your grief, and in addition, you are more uncomfortable because of the ways you have chosen to cope. Instead, thank your mind and body for helping you survive. Thank them for doing the best they could. As your cognitive function becomes more alert you may want to make different choices about the way you cope but give yourself grace for however you have coped up until now.

Let's look at some common activities or temporary relief distractions people use to avoid emotional discomfort.

*Overeating*

*Isolation*

*Over shopping*

*Sex*

*Overworking*

*Over sleeping*

*Inappropriate humor*

*Electronics – phone, tablets,  
computers*

*TV/Movies*

*Drugs*

*Fiction/Fantasy*

While these coping mechanisms may create some temporary relief, they don't help you to move through your grief. And over time these activities may even be detrimental. These behaviors put you in a holding pattern. You feel stuck, choosing actions that you know are not healthy. Obviously, some activities are more damaging than others. You will want to eliminate the most destructive habits first. It makes sense that you employed these distractions and may still participate in them. Sometimes you just needed immediate relief and these behaviors offered you immediate respite. Again, be kind to yourself as you start to make changes.

While these behaviors may have felt useful in your early grief, you may now be ready to start shifting to a more healthful approach. You will know what it is you want to change. They are likely things that have already come to mind.

Do not expect to make these changes immediately. These distractions have become a habit and it takes time to develop new habits. Stay as curious as possible instead of judgmental. When you catch yourself being judgmental, ask yourself how you can be more curious. It's a process. Be patient with yourself as you adopt new activities. This is not about all or nothing. This is about learning and adjusting as you go.



# Questions to Consider

1. Which grief myths have affected you the most?

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2. Which of these distractions do you find yourself doing?

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## More Temporary Relief Distractions

There are two other temporary relief distractions that need further explanation.

**Ruminating.** It is easy to let your thoughts go wild. Continuing to replay everything in your mind over and over again can become an obsession. It is a way of denying what’s happened by trying to concoct a new, better ending that can never happen. Some replaying of what happened in your mind is your brain trying to make sense of it. There are questions that you will want to answer. Some questions have answers and others don’t. Eventually, you will make the distinction and be able to satisfy the level of understanding that your mind is demanding. However, continuing to rehash the details day after day and hour after hour is not helpful. Perhaps some of the overthinking is a distraction to keep from having to face life and your current circumstances. If you find yourself constantly going back over the minutiae, consider picking a time each day to think about it and then during other times if you find yourself wanting to ruminate over your loss, direct your mind to other pursuits and remind yourself of your scheduled time to think about it. Having a plan and a scheduled time to think about it will allow your mind to relax.

**Blaming.** When something terrible happens, you may find yourself looking for someone or something to blame. You may blame those that try to come to your aid. Maybe you feel that they said the wrong thing or did the wrong thing. Perhaps they didn't honor your privacy or maybe they didn't reach out as quickly as you thought they should. Maybe they didn't show up or maybe they showed up the "wrong way." Perhaps they didn't show the level of empathy you thought they should, or they didn't pay close enough attention. There are any number of ways that we blame others when our feelings are already hurting due to grief. It's easier to blame those around us than it is to admit that we're hurting. When someone has a physical injury, they are more sensitive to touch. Similarly, when you are hurting emotionally, it's easier to be bugged by the people around you.

## Questions to Consider

- In what ways have you found yourself blaming others?

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## Keep Your Energy Moving

Emotion is energy in motion. To keep it moving you can employ activities such as write and rip, tapping, listening to music, screaming into a pillow, praying and exercising. Write and rip is simply writing out your emotions and why you feel that way onto a piece of paper. Then when you've fully expressed your feelings, rip it up and throw it away. It symbolizes releasing the unwanted emotion.

Tapping is lesser-known emotional release technique. In fact, it is also known as EFT or Emotional Freedom Technique. For a simple explanation of tapping look up "Jack Canfield tapping" on YouTube and watch his "How to use EFT Tapping to Accelerate Healing" video. He offers a simple process with a simple explanation. Other good resources for tapping are The Tapping Solution app for your mobile device and Brad Yates' many tapping videos on YouTube.

You can also add some of the following coping activities to keep your energy moving.

*Drink water*

*Eat fruit*

*Take a walk*

*Write in a journal*

*Draw*

*Ride a bike*

*Take a class*

*Call a friend*

*Enjoy a hobby*

# Questions to Consider

- Which of these ideas interest to you and why?

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- What are you willing to try this week?

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## Patience and Other’s Opinions

As you start to become more aware of the ways that you’ve coped up until now and as you learn new options to include additional healthful coping skills, it is vital that you remain patient with yourself. You will have much less success in making changes if you are berating yourself for not being able to make the changes you want to make. You’ll be far better off if you slowly adopt new habits to replace old unhealthy habits, then if you try to overhaul all your routines overnight.

This is a good time to also remember that no one can tell you how long your grief will last. Be gentle with yourself. You’re here because you’re working on your grief and you have sought the resources you need to cope and heal from your grief, which means you’re on a healing path.

Friends and family may offer their personal advice about where they feel that you should be on your grief path. They may say that it’s time to stop grieving, but they aren’t walking in your shoes. Remember, almost always their advice is offered because they love you. But also, their advice may be unhelpful. Because you love them, you may feel obligated to comply with their recommendations as best you can. You may feel that you need to rush the process or act “ok” to get their approval or to help *them* feel better. Letting go of others’ approval is crucial right now as you work through your grief. Furthermore, you are not responsible for other people’s feelings. Take responsibility for your own emotions and decisions and avoid acting based on guilt and shame.

When you take a closer look, you may find that you are often motivated based on what you think other people want you to do. You do this to try to feel better about yourself, thinking that if you can gain people's approval you will be ok. This is a hard path because it is impossible to please all people all the time. It's far better to be secure in your own path and work through the emotions you feel about other people's disapproval.

The best way to approach these challenges of impatience and judgment is to be curious. Ask yourself good questions out of pure curiosity, like *Why do I feel I must do something because someone said I should?* Or *What could I choose to do differently next time?* Or *How can I practice patience right now?* Or *What support do I need right now?*

***Curiosity is a desire to understand without trying to manipulate the result.*** Think about what curiosity feels like. Practice that feeling and then apply it to your conversations with yourself. Go into the feeling of curiosity at least once a day to explore how you are thinking and feeling. After you explore your experience with inquisitiveness, you'll be more prepared to make good decisions for yourself based on good information. Curiosity is a good approach when you are making changes in your habits and when you are incorporating new coping skills.

# Questions to Consider

- Where are you feeling pressured to be “ok”?

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- Where have you felt responsible for how other’s feel?

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- How can you take responsibility for your own emotions and decisions?

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**Suggested Build a Life After Loss Podcast Episodes:**

Ep. 8 Grief Myths

Ep. 15 Suffering is Optional

Ep. 40 Belief

Ep. 101 Moments of Clarity