

**COVID-19 and the Five Stages of Grief:
Pedagogical Applications of the Kübler-Ross Model**

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“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear” C.S. Lewis

“All the art of living lies in a fine mingling of letting go and holding on” Havelock Ellis

The abrupt changes to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic can be analogous to the experience of death or loss. For students this loss and its associated changes are dramatic – no more in-person learning environments, social routines disrupted, athletic seasons cancelled, and anticipated special events such as graduation ceremonies moved to virtual, social distancing formats. Furthermore, these same students moved off-campus, sometimes living in cramped quarters with limited access to technology. Not only have these disruptions resulted in extra stress but also grief, the overwhelming sorrow that follows a loss (Hafen & Hoeger, 1998). In this Roundtable Discussion, we explore the applications of the Kübler-Ross Model and its five stages of grief as a conceptual framework for understanding student responses to these unexpected changes and in particular to the sudden move to remote learning. Based on this framework, we will also discuss pedagogical strategies for enhancing student engagement and learning during these uncertain times. My goal is to embrace the “innovate and collaborate” conference theme by creating a forum that connects the stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) with pedagogical best practices that encompass three broad strategies for managing the grief process: Information and Communication, Emotional Support, and Guidance and Direction. As the above quotes illustrate, experiencing grief is scary and living through grief enviably shapes a new, different person. My hope is that our conversations will allow us to share experiences of how the stages of grief affect our approaches to teaching and inspire best practices for

remote learning that empower students and ourselves to thrive as a result or in spite of these unprecedented times.

My intended outcomes for the Roundtable Discussion are to explore the following issues/questions and create a set of best practices for remote learning that incorporate the pedagogical benefits of the in-person learning environment:

1. Explore the pedagogical applications of the Kübler-Ross Model and its five stages of grief to current teaching practices.
 - a. Discuss the five stages of grief relative to the sudden shift to remote learning. What types of losses did students experience? What were initial student reactions to remote learning and social distancing? In what ways were the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) illustrated by student attitudes and behaviors? What losses did you experiences in terms of teaching philosophy and approach?
2. Discuss strategies and techniques for helping students move through the five stages of grief as framed through 1) information and communication, 2) emotional support, and 3) guidance and direction.
 - a. What information was most crucial in the beginning? What were communication best practices? What did emotional support look like with your students? How did you provide guidance and direction? How did you manage students who are at different points in the stages of grief (e.g., stuck in anger or bargaining)?
3. Co-create a set of best practices for remote learning that incorporates awareness and sensitivity to the five stages of grief.
 - a. How do these practices address uncertainty about the future? What practices stem from core teaching philosophies and are effective regardless of whether teaching is remote or

in-person? How do personal experiences with loss inform your teaching approach during the COVID-19 pandemic?

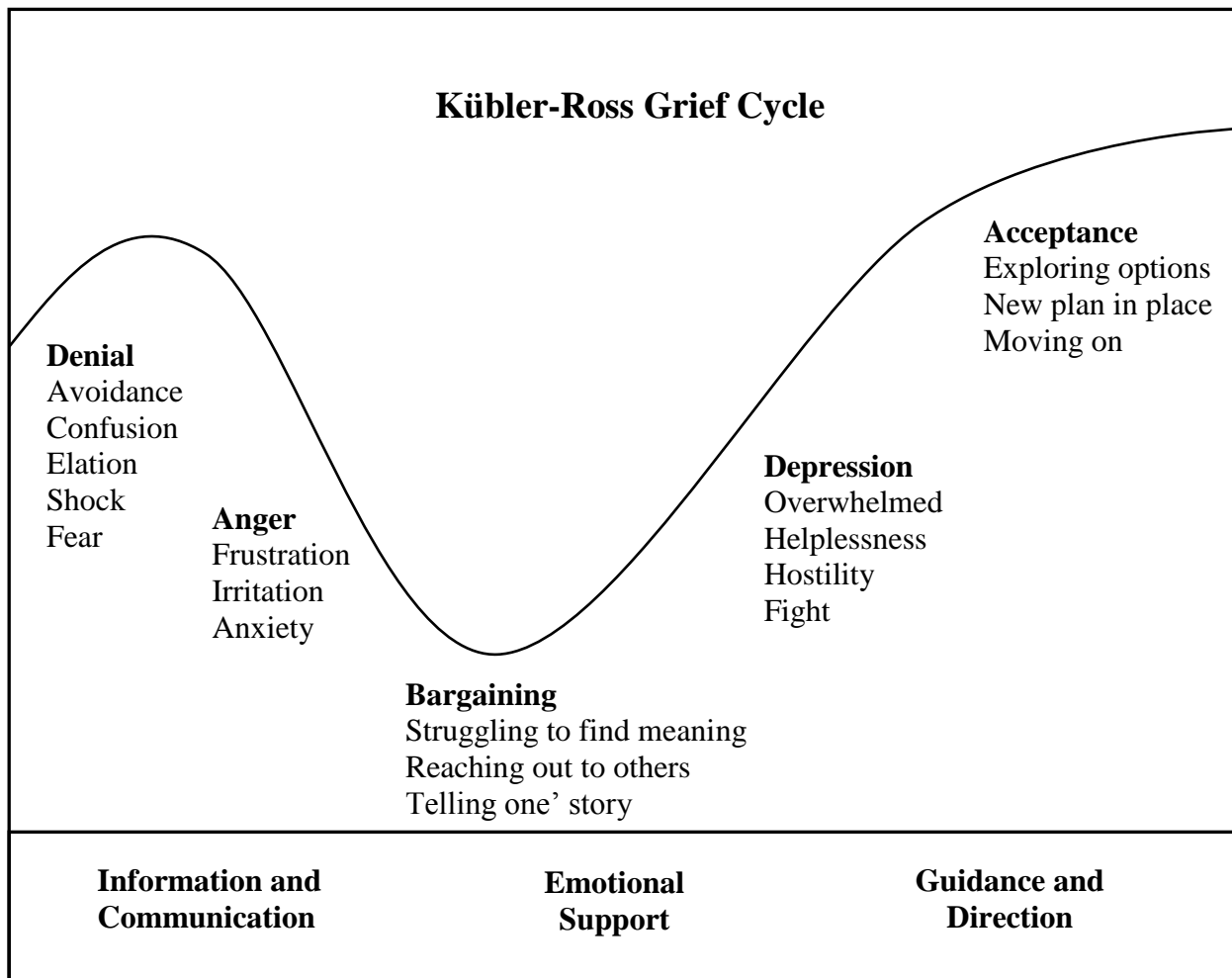
The intended audience for this Roundtable Discussion is any educator who is interested in applying the Kübler-Ross Model and its five stages of grief to better understand how students may be processing the changes related to the rapid move to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This session is also applicable to management educators interested in using this model as a conceptual framework for helping students (and themselves) move through the grief cycle by applying the strategies of information and communication, emotional support, and guidance and direction.

Theoretical Foundations and Teaching Implications

This Roundtable Discussion is centered on the Kübler-Ross Model and its five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Elizabeth Kübler-Ross is best known for her work with terminally ill patients and their experiences as they near death. Her research also applies to those who have survived a loved one's death, including the loss of a pet (e.g., Eckerd, Barnett, & Jett-Dias, 2016). Kübler-Ross' profound legacy can be seen through her body of work, her foundation and the proliferation of research that stems from her model (e.g., the Elizabeth Kübler-Ross foundation, <https://www.ekrfoundation.org/>, see also the Kübler-Ross Change Curve: <https://www.ekrfoundation.org/5-stages-of-grief/change-curve/>). The Kübler-Ross Change Curve highlights how the grief process can be associated with *any* change even if not related to a physical death. For example, the stages of grief have been applied to organizational change to explain resistance to compliance mandates (Boerner, 2008).

Figure 1 depicts the Kübler-Ross Model and its five stages. Each person progresses through the five stages at their own pace; inability to work through the stages can result in “being stuck” or abnormal grief which can have devastating consequences. Moreover, the stages of grief are not to be experienced in rapid-fire succession and it is natural to relapse back to an earlier stage as one progresses through grief. Indeed, recovery from significant loss can take 18 to 24 months and each person’s experience with loss is unique. Below I briefly describe the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This overview is followed by an application of the model to students’ reactions to remote learning with suggested strategies for managing students’ sense of loss.

Figure 1: The Kübler-Ross Model



Stage 1: Denial: Characteristics of this first stage are disbelief and shock. Life becomes meaningless and we feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with the change or loss. Isolation can accompany denial as just getting through the day is a chore. Denial is a necessary part of the healing process as it serves as a survival mechanism, allowing us to only let in what we can handle. (From Figure 1: avoidance, confusion, elation, shock, fear.)

Stage 2: Anger: As time progresses denial fades and reality sinks in, unleashing suppressed feelings such as frustration and anger. Questions emerge, “Why did this happen? Why me?” During this stage, you become easily agitated, impulsive, and blame yourself and others for the situation. As you make sense of the loss, anger can provide an anchor or focal point for your emotions, relieving you of the nothingness of denial. Anger indicates the intensity of the loss. (From Figure 1: frustration, irritation, anxiety.)

Stage 3: Bargaining: This stage embodies “what if” and “if only” scenarios. There is a focus on the past such that you seek answers to what could have been done differently. Could life be restored to how it was before the loss by wishing for a miracle? In bargaining you are trying to negotiate your way out of pain. In the intensity of the pain, guilt can be experienced for wanting the grief to be over and regret for past inactions. (From Figure 1: struggling to find meaning, reaching out to others, telling one’s story.)

Stage 4: Depression: Depression sets in as the reality of the loss is realized and this grief is felt both psychologically and physically. Emptiness, loneliness, fatigue, sadness all at such deep levels it feels like it will last forever. Professionals note that depression from grief is not a mental illness, is understandable and a necessary step in the grieving process. (From Figure 1: overwhelmed, helplessness, hostility, fight.)

Stage 5: Acceptance: In acceptance you recognize and accept your new reality. You may never be over the loss but you understand that it is a permanent loss and you must continue with life.

Acceptance entails readjustments, new roles, and experiencing more good days than bad days. This new life takes time but is characterized by growth and change. (From Figure 1: exploring options, new plan in place, moving on.)

Pedagogical Applications of the Kübler-Ross Model

Several recent studies have found that grief can negatively affect college students’ mental and physical health (e.g., Cupita, Servaty-Seibb, Parikhb, Walker, & Martina, 2016; Davis, Deane, & Lyons, 2016; de Vries-Erich, Dornan, Boerboom, Jaarsma, & Helmich, 2016; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2018). These studies also noted the importance of individual differences in grieving, social and student services support, as well as the fact that some students will remain private when it comes to their grief. Given these points, Table 1 presents an overview of the pedagogical applications of the Kübler-Ross Model. The table identifies the three broad strategies for managing the grief process relative to the stage of grief, noting examples of student responses to the sudden change to remote learning during each stage and suggesting strategies for managing these responses.

Table 1: Pedagogical Applications of the Kübler-Ross Model

Strategies for Managing Grief	Stage of Grief Cycle	Student Responses	Suggested Pedagogical Action
Information and Communication	Denial and Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Back to class by Easter” • Withdrawal from class (not attending, attending but not participating) • Not completing assignments • Irritation towards life, teacher • Fear about grade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish structure and routine quickly • Update course outline • Detailed agenda for class(es) • Specific about what is different/same • Encourage flipped classroom

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create culture of togetherness
Emotional Support	Bargaining and Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion about assignments, due dates • Trading discussion threads participation for class attendance; Under performing/Over performing • Disappointment due to missed special events, athletics, internships • Anxiety about Zoom classes; fear of future • Depression from isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show empathy and interest in their situations • Class check-ins to see how everyone is doing • Focus on them not you • Signal open mindedness/flexibility to assignment requirements – maintain standards • Work-in-process mentality • Reach out individually to students
Guidance and Direction	Depression (continued) and Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Continued Depression: overwhelmed, helplessness, hostility, fight) • Increased participation in Zoom meetings • Sharing what is working • Establishing new routines for life balance (fitness, school work, socializing) • Showing gratitude for those closely involved with change (e.g., teachers, coaches, family, church, community members) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to above: • Consistency with positive attitude and upbeat class rituals • Reiterate, repetitive about assignments, learning objectives • Open to student suggestions, implement feasible suggestions right away • Role model management of change. Share healthy strategies. Demonstrate can-do attitude

To generate conversation starters for the session, below are examples of actions I took that encompass the three strategies for managing grief.

Information and Communication:

- Quickly establish structure and routine to help reduce uncertainty and stress. Maintain consistency with the schedule while still being flexible about changes (e.g., moving due dates forward). Create a culture of togetherness.
- Communicate updated course outline, adjustments to assignments and any changes to point/percentage allocations. Clearly articulate what stays the same and what is being changed (group into two or three categories so it is manageable – not overwhelming to students). Ensure

changes are minor and benefit students. Provide to-do list to help students organize information and reassure students that they got this – they can do it.

- Organize the online learning management site. For participation grade add Discussion Threads for specific assignments (e.g., self-assessments, articles, activities) and add thread descriptors for what the student should be posting. Have deadlines but do not put a cutoff deadline into the thread (i.e., students can still post if they are a few days late). (Make sure to read the discussion threads!)
- Post extended Agenda for Class before each class session. These are annotated/narrated outlines of what is going to be covered in class. I have a separate folder for these on my college's online learning platform. Clearly communicate with students how you plan to use class time and clearly link class information with assignments. Do not use class time to go over lecture slides (still post these) but only focus on key concepts and encourage discussion. I make a specific "handout" for each class.
- Encourage a flipped classroom. Students in my courses are/were participating in web-based simulations so they can do this outside of class and then use class time for concept discussions. I spend the last part of the semester in Organizational Behavior on the topic managing change. Students participate in Change Management Simulation: Power and Influence, lead an informal debrief, prepare a written report then conduct interviews with people about their experiences with change and present their findings during the last few weeks of the semester. Tying these assignments with the changes related to COVID-19 added much value and interest to students. Try to "flip" assignments so students can do parts or all of the assignment outside of class and then report back in during class.

Emotional Support:

- Show empathy and interest in students' perspectives and experiences. I spend 5+ minutes at the beginning of class checking in with students, asking them about their concerns, what adjustments are they going through. We talk about change and stress and how they are managing the changes. Give credence to their experiences – focus on them, not you.
- Tie assignments and assessments (e.g., hardy personality – control, commitment, challenge) to managing loss. Gratitude and hope/optimism integrated into every class.
- I send out individual emails to students that may be having some difficulties or students that all of a sudden are not in class. I am careful to not invade privacy but to just let them know I am thinking about them and available if there is anything I can do to help.
- Signal open mindedness with how assignments are completed and a "working together" attitude about how presentations or other deliverables are accomplished. (Several right/good answers to an issue.)
- Meet individually for presentations with students in different time zones or students with high anxiety with Zoom environment.
- Realize that students are trying to juggle five-six courses. Many students chose a college because they need/prefer the in-person learning environment. Be sensitive to the learning curve and Gen Z learning preferences. Don't try to do too many "innovative" things, even if you can.

Guidance and Direction:

- Much of what is written above covers this but I consistently keep a positive attitude and I express how happy I am to see students. We establish class rituals with greetings as well as our all videos on wave good-bye.
- Be open-minded to student suggestions and implement their suggestions right away and/or explain why you did something different.
- Role model your management of change. Appropriately share ways that you are adapting to the change and demonstrate a can-do attitude. Empathy and optimism is a good combination.

Session Description – Timeline: Roundtable Discussion – 60 minutes

0-20 minutes: Introductions and brief overview of session. Explore the pedagogical applications of the Kübler-Ross Model and its five stages of grief. Discuss the five stages of grief relative to the sudden move to remote learning. What types of losses did students experience? What were initial student reactions to remote learning and social distancing? In what ways were the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) illustrated by students' attitudes and behaviors? What losses did you experiences in terms of teaching philosophy and approach? (Breakout Rooms for small group discussions, then come together for full group discussion.)

21-40 minutes: Discuss strategies and techniques for helping students move through the five stages of grief as framed through 1) information and communication, 2) emotional support, and 3) guidance and direction. What information was most crucial in the beginning? What were communication best practices? What did emotional support look like with your students? How did you provide guidance and direction? How did you manage students who are at different points in the stages of grief (e.g., stuck in anger or bargaining)?

41-50 minutes: Co-create a set of best practices for remote learning that incorporates awareness and sensitivity to the five stages of grief. How do these practices address uncertainty about the future?

What practices stem from core teaching philosophies and are effective regardless of whether teaching is remote or in-person? How do personal experiences with loss inform your teaching approach?

51-60 minutes: Summarize session and identify strategies and techniques that may be useful for your existing remote learning teaching practices.

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