

DENIAL

When reality feels too much to take in

Part of the Five Stages of Grief series — a fuller guide to numbness, disbelief, unreality and the mind's attempt to absorb a life-changing loss.

Denial does not always mean saying, “It didn't happen.”

You can know that someone has died and still find yourself expecting their key in the door, reaching for your phone to message them, or feeling as though the world around you cannot possibly be real. Denial can be far quieter than the word suggests.

Understanding denial in grief

In Kübler-Ross's original work with people facing death, denial and isolation described one possible response to overwhelming news. In bereavement the idea is often used more broadly to describe shock, disbelief, emotional numbness and difficulty integrating the reality of a loss.

The mind does not necessarily absorb a profound change in one moment. Facts may be understood intellectually before they are felt emotionally. That gap can be confusing: “I know, but I don't feel as though I know.”

Rather than treating this as failure, it can be understood as part of the enormous adjustment grief asks the brain, body and sense of self to make.

What denial can look like

- Feeling numb or strangely calm.
- Repeatedly thinking the person will return.
- Talking about them in the present tense without intending to.
- Keeping routines exactly as they were.
- Avoiding places, conversations or objects that make the loss feel real.
- Feeling detached, foggy or as though you are watching life from outside yourself.
- Throwing yourself into work or practical tasks.
- Understanding what happened but being unable to connect emotionally with it.

Important

There is no requirement to experience denial, and experiencing it does not tell us how long or intensely somebody will grieve. The five stages are not compulsory or sequential.

When the ordinary world feels unfamiliar

Loss changes more than the presence of one person. It can alter routines, roles, identity, finances, plans, relationships, home life and the imagined future. The brain continues to encounter expectations built when the person was alive: their chair, their usual time to call, a familiar supermarket aisle, a programme you watched together.

These moments can create repeated collisions between the world you knew and the world that now exists. A sudden wave of disbelief months later is therefore not proof that you are 'back at the beginning'.

The body can be involved too

Shock and grief can be felt physically. People may notice exhaustion, restlessness, altered sleep, appetite changes, tightness, shakiness, difficulty concentrating or a sense of being on automatic pilot. Physical symptoms can also have medical causes, so new, severe or worrying symptoms should not simply be assumed to be grief.

Grounding when everything feels unreal

Try naming five things you can see, four things you can physically feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste or imagine tasting. Then gently orient yourself: where am I, what day is it, and what do I need for the next ten minutes?

Denial is not the same as forgetting

A moment of forgetting can happen almost automatically: seeing something they would love and reaching for your phone; waking and needing a second to remember; hearing a noise and expecting them. These moments can be intensely painful because the reality of the loss arrives again.

Try not to turn that moment into a judgement about yourself. Attachment, habit and memory do not instantly reorganise because circumstances have changed.

When other people rush you

Friends or relatives may push for practical changes because they believe removing belongings, returning to work or talking openly will 'help you accept it'. There is no universal timetable. Practical necessities sometimes cannot wait, but emotional readiness is different. Where possible, choices can be broken into smaller steps rather than forced all at once.

A boundary you can use

"I understand that this may need dealing with, but I am not ready to do all of it today. I need to take this in smaller pieces."

Supporting yourself through denial and shock

The goal is not to force yourself to confront everything. Gentle contact with reality, alongside enough safety and support, is usually more humane than pushing for a breakthrough.

Keep life small when you need to

Focus on the next meal, drink, shower, phone call or hour rather than demanding that you understand the rest of your life. Grief can make executive functioning and decision-making harder.

Use practical anchors

Write appointments down. Use reminders. Ask somebody to accompany you to difficult meetings. Keep important information in one place. Repetition is not weakness when concentration is reduced.

Let trusted people repeat things

In shock, information can be difficult to retain. It is reasonable to ask a professional, funeral director, family member or friend to slow down, repeat information or put it in writing.

Allow remembrance without forcing exposure

Some people want photographs close immediately; others cannot look at them. Some need belongings untouched; others need change. There is no single therapeutic rule that fits every grief.

A gentle reality statement

Try: "Something enormous has happened. I do not have to understand all of it today. I can take in what I can manage, and return to the rest later."

Anonymous perspective

"For weeks I kept thinking I should call them. I knew they had died — I had been there — but another part of me carried on as though our ordinary life was still happening. I thought that meant I was refusing to accept it. What helped was understanding that my head and my heart were processing the change at different speeds."

What supporters can do

Be present without demanding a particular emotional response. Offer concrete help rather than saying only 'let me know'. Repeat information patiently. Avoid telling someone they 'need to accept it'. Respect that belongings and rituals can carry enormous meaning. Check in again after the initial rush of support has quietened.

Reflection: noticing rather than judging

Use any of these prompts that feel helpful. Leave the rest.

What still feels impossible to believe?

When do I most strongly expect the old reality to return?

What am I avoiding because it makes the loss feel suddenly real?

Does avoiding it help me right now, or is it beginning to make my world smaller?

What is one small piece of reality I can tolerate today without forcing myself to face everything?

Who helps me feel steadier when I become overwhelmed or unreal?

My grounding plan

Person I can contact: _____

Place that feels safer: _____

Object, sound or sensation that grounds me: _____

One practical task somebody else could help with: _____

When extra support may be useful

Grief can be extremely intense without meaning that something is wrong with you. At the same time, you deserve support when distress is overwhelming or persistent.

Consider speaking with a GP, therapist, bereavement service or another appropriate professional if you are finding everyday functioning extremely difficult, are becoming increasingly isolated, are relying heavily on alcohol or substances to cope, experience persistent symptoms that concern you, or feel unable to keep yourself safe.

If you are in immediate danger

Seek urgent help through your local emergency service or urgent mental-health support. This resource is educational and cannot provide emergency care.

A message from Maggie

If your loss still does not feel real, you do not need to bully yourself into accepting it. Sometimes the reality is simply too large to take in all at once.

You may understand what happened and still reach for the person who is no longer there. You may feel nothing when everybody expects tears, then be overwhelmed by something tiny weeks later. Grief does not have to make sense from the outside.

Give yourself permission to take in what you can, when you can. The aim is not to prove that you have reached the next stage. It is to find enough support and steadiness to live through what has changed.

Books & resources

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross — *On Death and Dying*: the original work associated with the five-stage formulation.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross & David Kessler — *On Grief and Grieving*: later application of the stages to bereavement.

Megan Devine — *It's OK That You're Not OK*: a non-stage-based, validating approach to grief.

Mary-Frances O'Connor — *The Grieving Brain*: explores grief through neuroscience, attachment and learning.

Clinical context & references

Kübler-Ross E. (1969), *On Death and Dying*. Macmillan. Kübler-Ross E. & Kessler D. (2005), *On Grief and Grieving*. Scribner. The Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Foundation's educational material emphasises that the stages are not a prescribed linear progression. Contemporary bereavement approaches also recognise substantial individual variation and caution against treating stage models as universal sequences.

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