



THE GRIEF CYCLE

I am not a qualified psychologist and must make that clear.

This is written purely from having some knowledge of the main components of a grief cycle gained while working on a Christian Counselling course and it has been adapted round an article written by the Rev Nancy Lane of the Healing Ministry in the United States.

However, it has been written very specifically to have some relevance to the extraordinary losses being experienced by Zimbabweans as they leave, or are forced out of their homeland with little or no choice in that decision, other than the need for survival and a better future for their children.

First of all, it is important to understand that grief gains momentum anytime the reality of loss affects, or is allowed to affect your life. So there is real point in looking for the positives in everything around you every day, as far as is humanly possible. Constant comparisons with home (which is often the immediate and first tendency) are enormously more damaging than is commonly realised.

In addition, any new loss or disappointment within your new situation, triggers feelings associated with other, earlier losses and disappointments, which have not been laid to rest. Unfortunately, each instance may revive afresh, all the remembered sadness, frustration, helplessness and anger – this is why, when others around you are finding it hard or even considering going back perhaps, you feel so absolutely 'clobbered'.

It is important to identify the various stages of grief ... to recognise them as such and if they occur, to understand they are part of a process and "tick them off" in order to finally break the cycle and free yourself. This in no way means that you have to deny what you love and loved about Zimbabwe. You will just learn to put it in context and understand that there are huge plusses in being able to start again in a country, which although very different, is one of the world's most fortunate places to be.

The five component parts of a grief cycle are :

- ◆ shock and despair
- ◆ anger
- ◆ bargaining
- ◆ depression
- ◆ acceptance

I would urge you to read through this – you may well feel you don't need it – but there are elements of truth in the whole for all of us. The secret is to gain some understanding of what is involved and then, for your survival's sake, to learn to manage the situation.



1. SHOCK AND DESPAIR:

The sense of disbelief and heartbreak caused by the initial loss is often overlooked, as to a certain extent numbness sets in at the time, which can anaesthetise the actual effect.

- Any major loss may cause very real shock as it changes dreams, goals and expectations that had been taken for granted. As with any shock, this can have real physical consequences – not quite the dramatic shock experienced as the result of an accident, but a chronic shock, which creates a feeling of generally being below par to a greater or lesser extent. Immediately, this results in lack of energy and enthusiasm, inability to achieve anything, wandering around blank, thoughts centring on the loss etc. In the longer term, although it has not been fully researched, but we have enough anecdotal evidence through the Zimbabwe connection alone, this initial shock is thought to be a contributory cause of cancer or other life threatening diseases unless it is properly managed – **so there are vital reasons why it is important to get on top of it.**
- Despair is usually about losses related to our person - the Self. It is all about what we are now without (our country, our friends, our family, our status).
- There can be real despair over the inevitable frustrations related to what might be termed 'increased barriers to access' in a new country – in that you don't know anyone and don't know how things work. These can become seeming insurmountable obstacles in seeking homes, the means to make a living, employment, schools which at least match what we feel we had, medical care, and ultimately social inclusion. You have no contacts. Everyone knows everyone else – they don't know you – nor do they, in true Aussie parlance, give a damn, until they do! However, conversely, once they do understand your situation, they can be the most caring people in the world. Increasingly, Australians understand what is happening in Zimbabwe and particularly in regional areas, their support has been magnificent.

2. ANGER:

The next stage in the cycle will be a period of anger - usually when the first pangs of shock and despair are beginning to diminish. In fact, when the numbness begins to wear off and you are face to face with a new reality.

- Anger at the loss itself – the unfairness, the stupidity, the disruption, the feeling of not belonging, the friends or family you may never see again.
- Anger at ourselves (did we cause it? what could we have done better? do we deserve it? The "why" questions).
- Anger at God. Someone has to be to blame. God frequently becomes the butt of this anger. Why did He let it happen to me? It is very important, even though you might not like to be thought of as being angry with God, to be able to identify that anger and ultimately the unreasonable nature of that anger, so that there can be forgiveness of God! This in nearly every case will result in a stronger relationship with God and with that, the strength to face what is so painful now.
- Anger at the perpetrators and at those who 'did nothing to help'. It is important to think it through, see it in context, understand why it happened and why others may not have been able to help



- Anger, mixed with anxiety and concern, at others who cannot 'see the writing on the wall' – as well as your own insecurities about whether you have done the right thing.
- Anger at the difficulties you find at having to accept that you are now on the receiving end instead of on the giving end – often dependent now on the care and charity of others.
- Anger lowers our self-esteem – we may see it as being unforgivable – we should be able to manage it, yet do not seem able to do so.
- Anger unexplained will lead to a feeling of being overwhelmed by helplessness and being out of control.
- Anger lays us bare. The gaps between our idealised self-image and our ability to cope, and our actual selves under the strain of grief are exposed, often shattering illusions. When we have come to accept our limitations and our capabilities, when our ideal selves are in reasonable harmony, our self-regard is likely to be secure and resilient. It can absorb some of the bruises
- Anger leads to feelings of inadequacy, guilt and hostility.
- Anger leads you to be over-sensitive to your new situation – in other words, you cannot cope with criticism of the place or of the actions you have taken and begin to doubt them. The most critical aspect of this is that in your desperation to settle again, you will blame the circumstances around you and frequently give up on them too soon.

3. BARGAINING:

This is the attempt to return to normal ... but it can also become a stage of denial – and in its own way, just as dangerous. Nobody can move through grief until they have enough strength to face and come to terms with their inner pain. This can result in the following:

- Making a change or achieving a level of contentment which leads on to unrealistic euphoria.
- Expecting the "new" life to be perfect (feeling that after all you have been through – you deserve it) and suffering exponential disappointment and betrayal when it isn't.
- With that comes an element of refusing to face reality. Difficulty in showing gratitude or even feeling gratitude to those around you who are trying to help. Ultimately, what can become the most isolating factor is becoming so self focussed that you are unable to show at least some form of gratitude or acknowledgment to those who are trying to help.
- Trying to move family and friends with you into your own 'loss' in order to lighten your load - then becoming angry when they will not do so.
- Being hyper-critical of everything that is part of the 'new' life, and only seeing the 'old' through rose coloured spectacles. This happens because somehow you feel you are not forgetting or 'letting down' the old life by being critical. This leads on to the cruel deception, that by doing so, you might somehow get back to the pre-grief situation.



- Blaming the new situation for 'not working' and finding every excuse to give up instead of persisting until you have at least widened your own and your family's options through gaining of residency and Australian citizenship etc
- Baulking or refusing, even sub-consciously, to become part of the 'new' life – while not understanding that the 'old' is still part of who you are and what makes you unique.

4. DEPRESSION:

Depression is an expected response to significant loss or grieving. It will occur as the bargaining time bears no fruit. It is the result of unidentified or examined feelings of helplessness with a loss of esteem, and outward signs of inner fear of reality. Depression usually enfolds a faltering self-image. Some depressions require medical intervention (and don't be ashamed of asking for this – we're talking about your successful survival) – others, perhaps more often in those with a strong faith, don't. All depression is related to our search for meaning and purpose and it must be recognised as a mental or spiritual journey which can go sour and lead into further darkness. Ask what God is saying to you in depression. Then, whatever you do, don't keep it to yourself - speak to friends, relatives – or if none of those are around, get professional help.

Depression is a direct reaction to:

- Loss of perceived images and abilities of self.
- Loss of the image of what it means to be an upwardly mobile and successful family.
- Loss of expected or hoped for dreams.
- Loss of abilities once had or wished for.
- Loss of or impaired health.
- Pain that is not controlled.
- Inability to fix or change the situation.
- Guilt: 'survivor' guilt or guilt that you should have been able to prevent the problem.

5. ACCEPTANCE:

This happens sometimes surprisingly quickly – but it is most often the result of a deliberate act on your part having understood and recognised the phases which have gone before, to try and see the positives of what you have done.

- This does not mean immediately "liking" one's new situation. It means learning to live positively within it rather than allowing the victim persona to dominate and suffer.
- Letting go of the ideals of power and perfection.



- No longer turning critical judgments from others into harsh self-judgments (letting go of the tyranny of the "you should" syndrome from well-meaning friends.)
- Recognising anger and finding appropriate expressions of it in safe places. Learning how, when controlled and analysed, anger can be creative ... putting it to work for us, rather than against us.
- Self-forgiveness - forgiving God and others, so that you eliminate guilt and disappointment.
- Letting go of lost or shattered dreams, reconciling oneself to the reality of the new.
- Accepting that which cannot be changed, while looking for modifications for those things which can be changed.
- Deliberately looking for the positives in every aspect of the 'new'. Becoming involved in your community, volunteering, taking up a new sport or hobby.

IN CONCLUSION:

It takes time. But it happens!

And once it has happened, you will look back and be grateful for your growth and strength through that adversity.

Be gentle on yourself and your family. They will all be at a different stage of grief and may not be able to talk about it openly.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. You will probably hit the wall at some stage. Everyone does – because we have all lost an awful lot. Believe me it is very hard to work through it yourself. Your GP will understand far more than you think. If medication could help you get through, don't be afraid to go to your GP and ask for help. Also, don't be afraid to ask another ex-Zim for a shoulder. Then make a really positive effort to move on and make some Aussie friends too.

The grief cycle is part of our growth – spiritual and physical. Don't avoid it, or merely endure it ... enter into it, understand it, walk through it and move beyond it.

And once again - never be afraid to ask for help!

For most of us who have been through it, it has been immensely strengthening and we have ended up extremely thankful for what we have – the right to live in two wonderful continents.

Jill Lambert
Australia : 2002