

The Nine Stages of Grief in Parents of RAD Kids

by **Monica Acord**

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The stages of grief, as modeled by Kubler-Ross, are usually associated with those recovering from the loss of a loved one; however, these stages are weathered by anyone experiencing a loss of any kind. A person can grieve over many things, such as the loss of a job, marriage, health, or even a material possession. In each case, a loss is experienced. Depending on the severity of that loss combined with the personality of the individual involved, the stages of grief can last only a few minutes or the duration of a lifetime. This grieving process is extremely difficult for new adoptive parents of children with Reactive Attachment Disorder, because it begins almost instantly before there has been an appropriate lapse in time for parents to sufficiently bond with their new child. The bonding is delayed due to the emotional distancing of the RAD child. Parents have conflicting emotions between sorrow for the child and his/her past and then those for himself in his loss of enjoying and controlling a stable home environment. Parents must decide whether they can endure parenting a child who lacks the inner resources to reciprocate their love by becoming a willing participant in the family. Whether parents choose to finalize or disrupt the adoption, a loss is experienced. The following is a variation of the Kubler-Ross model of the Stages of Grief, which has been conformed to the loss that parents of RAD children find themselves as they progress to the final level of adjustment.

* **SHOCK** After a brief honeymoon period, full of excitement and idealistic dreams, one has the realization that his child is unhealthy. Even when parents have been told of their child's past behaviors, many do not understand the full realm that the accumulation of those behaviors entail until after they have experienced life with that child. One may have feelings of bewilderment and numbness.

* **DENIAL:** Denial protects our emotional well being from shock. One may make excuses for the child's behaviors such as: the child didn't understand my instructions. He/she needs more time to adjust. I am expecting too much too soon. I probably didn't perceive that situation correctly.

* **ANGER:** Outrage towards the obstinate child, biological family, Child Protective Services, court system, or anyone who played an intricate part in causing the damage to their child. One may also be angry at their spouse for lack of support or even certain family members for their lack of acceptance and understanding. Often these feelings of fury are surprising to the person experiencing them.

* **DEPRESSION:** Anger without any solutions can lead to feelings of isolation and despair. One is emotionally paralyzed. One may feel as if he were an outsider observing the stranger within his own household. Conversations with friends seem shallow and frivolous. Support is needed.

* **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF DISTRESS:** The most common symptom is the preoccupation of thoughts directed towards the child. No matter how hard one tries to think about something else, the unhealthy child always dominates his mind. Other symptoms of distress can include: ulcers, headaches, nervousness, lack of sleep, shortness of breath, digestive problems, lack of appetite, or uncontrollable eating.

* **INABILITY TO RENEW NORMAL ACTIVITIES:** The RAD child will not permit the family to pursue their routine activities without turmoil. Parents may also find that their marriage is suffering from lack of quality time with one another. Many are without babysitters who are capable of managing an emotionally disturbed child.

* **GUILT FEELINGS:** One feels guilt for his lack of parenting skills in not being able to bring about the proper results in his child. A parent may also feel guilty for his feelings of ambivalence towards the child, and wonder what is missing from his own character that causes him not to feel more bonded. A deep examination of one's own role in the relationship eventually leads to forgiveness of self and decision.

* **GRADUALLY OVERCOMING GRIEF:** The decision to take action either by disrupting or finalizing the adoption. Either way, new hope for the child and one's homelife begins. If finalizing, techniques to control the child's behaviors are administered, adjusted, and emotional counseling usually begins. Parents' emotional equilibrium gradually returns.

* **READJUSTMENTS TO NEW REALITIES:** Acceptance and willingness to invest in a whole new reality. A reality where you are stronger because most of our parenting skills, relationships, and inner resources have been thoroughly tested.

New parents of RAD children can find support in knowing that these stages are a normal part of the adjustment period. Parents will also have a better understanding of their child as he/she too must go through these same stages of grief and loss before reaching their final level of adjustment as well.

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