

The 12-Stage Cycle of Grief

Grief is a cycle, not a ladder. It begins at Ground Zero — the moment of loss — and runs through twelve stages. **Not in order, and not once.** Most people move back and forth, and a new loss can start the whole thing again. There is no timetable, and nobody is behind.

0	Ground Zero	The moment of loss. The event itself, before anything has been felt about it.
1	Shock	Even an expected loss arrives with shock. The body registers it before the mind agrees to.
2	Denial	“It’s not happening.” Sometimes loud, more often quiet — carrying on the routine as though nothing has changed.
3	Betrayal	The feeling of being left behind, which usually arrives dressed as anger. “You should have taken better care of yourself.”
4	Sadness	Not only crying. A heavy, colourless flatness. Everything is harder, and regret starts to surface.
5	Guilt and shame	“I should have visited more. I should have called.” We put ourselves on trial for what we might have done.
6	Identity crisis	“Who am I without them?” The bottom of the cycle. Christmases, birthdays, routines — all of it changed.
7	Understanding	Meaning-making begins. “At least we had that time.” The first movement upward, and it is slow.
8	Acceptance	Not forgetting, and not moving on. The deeper realisation that they are gone and you are still here.
9	Forgiveness	Letting go of blame — of yourself, of them for leaving, of doctors, of circumstance.
10	Healing	You begin to rebuild. The heaviness lifts. Joy starts to return, usually before you trust it.
11	The new normal	Life after grief: stability, clarity, some peace. But grief is never finished. A new event can start the cycle again.

How to use this. Find roughly where you are. That is all it is for. You may be in two stages at once, or back in one you thought you had finished — both are normal. Grief is not only for death: you can grieve a marriage, a diagnosis, a job, or a person who is still alive.