

Coping with Stress & Grieving in Long-term Illness and Disability by Barbara Brugler, LISW

THE STAGES OF GRIEF

1. **Denial** — "I feel fine." "This can't be happening, not to me." Denial is usually only a temporary defense for the individual. This feeling is generally replaced with heightened awareness of possessions and individuals that will be left behind after death.
 - **Anger** — "Why me? It's not fair!" "How can this happen to me?" "Who is to blame?" Once in the second stage, the individual recognizes that denial cannot continue. Because of anger, the person is very difficult to care for due to misplaced feelings of rage and envy.
 - **Bargaining** — "I'll do anything for a few more years." "I will give my life savings if..." The third stage involves the hope that the individual can somehow postpone or delay death. Usually, the negotiation for an extended life is made with a higher power in exchange for a reformed lifestyle. Psychologically, the individual is saying, "I understand I will die, but if I could just do something to buy more time..."
 - **Depression** — "I'm so sad, why bother with anything?" "I'm going to die soon so what's the point... What's the point?" "I miss my loved one, why go on?" During the fourth stage, the dying person begins to understand the certainty of death. Because of this, the individual may become silent, refuse visitors and spend much of the time crying and grieving. This process allows the dying person to disconnect from things of love and affection. It is not recommended to attempt to cheer up an individual who is in this stage. It is an important time for grieving that must be processed.
 - **Acceptance** — "It's going to be okay." "I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it." In this last stage, individuals begin to come to terms with their mortality, or that of a loved one, or other tragic event.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress Overload

The following table lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress. The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the closer you may be to stress overload.

Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms	
Cognitive Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Memory problems 2. Inability to concentrate 3. Poor judgment 4. Seeing only the negative 5. Anxious or racing thoughts 6. Constant worrying 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Moodiness 2. Irritability or short temper 3. Agitation, inability to relax 4. Feeling overwhelmed 5. Sense of loneliness and isolation 6. Depression or general unhappiness
Physical Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aches and pains 2. Diarrhea or constipation 3. Nausea, dizziness 4. Chest pain, rapid heartbeat 5. Loss of sex drive 6. Frequent colds 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Eating more or less 2. Sleeping too much or too little 3. Isolating yourself from others 4. Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities 5. Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax 6. Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)
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Keep in mind that the signs and symptoms of stress can also be caused by other psychological and medical problems. If you're experiencing any of the warning signs of stress, it's important to see a doctor for a full evaluation. Your doctor can help you determine whether or not your symptoms are stress-related.

Things that influence your stress tolerance level

- **Your support network** – A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against life's stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Your sense of control** – If you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. People who are vulnerable to stress tend to feel like things are out of their control.
- **Your attitude and outlook** – Stress-hardy people have an optimistic attitude. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, accept that change is a part of life, and believe in a higher power or purpose.
- **Your ability to deal with your emotions** – You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or afraid. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you bounce back from adversity.
 - a. **Your knowledge and preparation** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.
 - b. Sense of humor, accept that change is a part of life, and believe in a higher power or purpose.