

Bargaining Stage

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1. Core Definition

The **bargaining stage** represents the third phase in Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's seminal "Five Stages of Grief" model, a framework that describes the emotional process individuals often experience when confronted with impending death or significant loss. Following **denial** and **anger**, bargaining is characterized by an often desperate attempt to negotiate or make deals, typically with a higher power, fate, or even medical professionals, in an effort to postpone or reverse the inevitable outcome of loss. This stage is fueled by a profound desire to regain control over circumstances that feel overwhelmingly out of one's hands, seeking a reprieve from the emotional pain and the reality of the situation. It is a period where individuals might cling to hope, however slim, that they can alter the trajectory of their suffering through some form of trade-off or promise.

During this complex phase, the individual's mind often engages in hypothetical scenarios, frequently expressed through "what if" or "if only" statements. These thoughts reflect a yearning to revisit past choices or imagine alternative actions that might have prevented the current distress or could still mitigate its impact. The bargaining stage is not solely limited to negotiations with external entities; it can also manifest as an internal dialogue where the grieving person makes promises of reformed behavior, increased devotion, or a commitment to a better life in exchange for the alleviation of their suffering or the return of what was lost. This intense mental activity serves as a coping mechanism, offering a temporary sense of agency in the face of helplessness.

A classic illustration of the bargaining stage involves a family member of a critically ill patient, such as a child whose parent is battling stage-4 cancer. In such a scenario, the child might fervently pray, promising to become a "better daughter" or "better son" - exhibiting improved behavior, academic excellence, or unwavering devotion - if only their mother or father could recover from the illness and be granted more time. This example highlights the deeply personal and often selfless nature of these bargains, where the individual offers something of themselves in exchange for the well-being or extended presence of their loved one. The inherent emotional weight of these negotiations underscores the profound distress and the yearning for a different outcome that defines this critical stage of grief.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the **bargaining stage**, as an identifiable component of the grieving process, originated with Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist. Her groundbreaking work, most notably documented in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, introduced the "Five

Stages of Grief" model to a wide audience. Kubler-Ross developed this framework based on her extensive clinical observations and interviews with terminally ill patients, where she meticulously cataloged the emotional patterns they exhibited as they confronted their mortality. The term "bargaining" was chosen to encapsulate the distinct psychological phenomenon she observed, where individuals attempted to negotiate for more time or a less painful outcome, often reflecting a struggle to accept the finality of death or loss.

Prior to Kubler-Ross's contributions, the emotional responses to death and loss were often viewed in less structured or systematic ways within the medical and psychological communities. Her model provided a coherent and accessible framework that helped clinicians, caregivers, and grieving individuals themselves understand and contextualize the often overwhelming and confusing array of emotions associated with significant loss. The inclusion of bargaining as a distinct stage highlighted a particular human tendency to seek control and to resist the uncontrollable aspects of life and death through a series of internal or external negotiations. This stage was presented as a natural progression from the initial shock of **denial** and the subsequent emotional outburst of **anger**, serving as a transitional phase before the onset of profound sadness.

The historical development of the bargaining concept is inextricably linked to the broader acceptance and popularization of Kubler-Ross's entire model. While the model has faced subsequent critiques and refinements, its initial impact was profound, shifting the paradigm for understanding end-of-life care and bereavement. The idea that individuals might engage in "bargains" with a higher power, or themselves, in the face of loss resonated with many, providing a descriptive lens through which to view a common, albeit often unarticulated, human experience. This stage, along with the others, contributed significantly to the fields of thanatology and palliative care, emphasizing the psychological and emotional dimensions of dying and grieving.

3. Key Characteristics

A central characteristic of the **bargaining stage** is the pervasive feeling of guilt, often manifesting as an intense preoccupation with "if onlys" and "what ifs." Individuals caught in this stage frequently ruminate on past actions or inactions, believing that a different choice or a more virtuous behavior on their part could have altered the devastating outcome. This self-reproach can be incredibly powerful, leading to a deep sense of responsibility for events that were ultimately beyond their control. The mind revisits moments, searching for errors or omissions, creating an internal narrative where personal failings are linked to the occurrence of the loss, no matter how illogical this connection may be to an outside observer. This internal struggle is a significant emotional burden, compounding the existing pain of grief.

Another defining feature is the attempt to negotiate, which can take various forms but typically involves making promises in exchange for a desired outcome. These bargains are often directed

towards a divine entity, a spiritual force, or even fate itself, reflecting a desperate hope to regain control over an uncontrollable situation. For example, a person might vow to dedicate their life to a charitable cause, to mend broken relationships, or to adopt a healthier lifestyle, all with the implicit or explicit condition that their loved one be spared, or that they be granted more time. These promises are rarely rational but are born out of intense emotional pain and a deep-seated human instinct to prevent or undo harm, however impossible that may seem. The act of bargaining, in this context, serves as a psychological effort to exert some influence over the immutable.

The pursuit of a "deal" in the bargaining stage is intrinsically linked to a profound desire to delay the inevitable or to minimize the suffering associated with the loss. It represents a desperate holding pattern, a resistance to the finality that **acceptance** eventually brings. This phase can also involve seeking ways to avert secondary losses or complications that might arise from the primary loss, such as praying for financial stability after the death of a primary earner. Individuals may scour for alternative treatments, seek second opinions, or research every possible avenue, all driven by the hope that there might be a loophole, a way out of the painful reality. This relentless quest for solutions, even in the face of insurmountable odds, is a testament to the powerful human instinct to preserve life and maintain connections.

4. Significance and Impact

The **bargaining stage** holds significant psychological importance within the grieving process, serving as a crucial, albeit often challenging, coping mechanism for individuals grappling with profound loss. It represents a transitional phase where the raw emotions of **anger** begin to coalesce into a more focused, albeit desperate, effort to influence circumstances. This stage allows individuals to process the overwhelming reality of their situation by channeling their emotional energy into an active, albeit ultimately futile, pursuit of control. By engaging in internal or external negotiations, the grieving person can temporarily delay the full impact of their loss, providing a mental buffer that can be vital in the initial, intense throes of grief. This period of active striving, however unrealistic, can sometimes offer a sense of purpose and agency when everything else feels chaotic and uncontrollable.

Furthermore, the identification of bargaining as a distinct stage within Kubler-Ross's model has had a considerable impact on how grief is understood and addressed in therapeutic and palliative care settings. Recognizing this phase helps mental health professionals and caregivers validate the complex emotions experienced by grieving individuals, including guilt, regret, and the desperate hope for a different outcome. Understanding that these feelings are a normal, if sometimes intense, part of the process can alleviate self-blame and provide a framework for empathetic support. Therapists can guide individuals through these intense feelings, helping them process the "what ifs" and "if onlys" without judgment, and gradually steering them towards a more realistic understanding of their situation, thereby preparing them for the eventual move towards

depression and acceptance.

Ultimately, the bargaining stage, with its inherent struggle and emotional intensity, plays a pivotal role in the broader journey towards **acceptance**. While the bargains themselves may not change the reality of the loss, the internal work performed during this stage can be transformative. It forces individuals to confront the limits of their control and to grapple with the irreversibility of their situation. This confrontation, however painful, is a necessary step in disentangling from the illusion of control and beginning to integrate the loss into one's life. The experience of bargaining, with its fervent hopes and eventual realization of limitations, helps to pave the way for a deeper understanding of grief's inevitability and the possibility of finding meaning and adaptation beyond the initial despair.

5. Debates and Criticisms

While the **bargaining stage**, as part of Kubler-Ross's "Five Stages of Grief" model, has significantly influenced public and professional understanding of bereavement, it has also been a subject of considerable debate and criticism. A primary contention revolves around the model's implied linearity and universality. Critics argue that not everyone experiences these stages in the prescribed order, nor does everyone experience every stage. The emotional journey through grief is highly individual and often cyclical, with individuals moving back and forth between different feelings or experiencing multiple emotions simultaneously. Therefore, framing bargaining as a distinct, sequential phase might oversimplify the intricate and often messy reality of human grief, potentially leading individuals to feel that their grief is "incorrect" if it doesn't align with the model.

Another significant criticism directed at the Kubler-Ross model, and consequently at the concept of bargaining within it, concerns the lack of robust empirical evidence to support the existence of distinct, sequential stages of grief. While Kubler-Ross's work was based on extensive clinical observations, it was not initially developed as an empirical model in the strict scientific sense. Subsequent research attempting to validate the model's stages through quantitative studies has yielded mixed results, with many studies failing to confirm the consistent progression through these five stages. This raises questions about the generalizability of the bargaining stage as a universally applicable or consistently observable phenomenon in all grieving individuals, suggesting it might be one of many possible coping strategies rather than a mandatory phase.

Furthermore, some scholars and practitioners argue that focusing too rigidly on "stages" can pathologize grief or create unrealistic expectations for the grieving process. If a person finds themselves lingering in the bargaining stage, for instance, they might interpret this as a failure to progress or an indication of an unhealthy response. This can undermine the natural and adaptive variability of human grief, which can manifest in countless ways. While the concept of bargaining accurately describes a common response to loss--the desire to undo or prevent it--the rigid

categorization of it as a fixed stage may inadvertently detract from a more holistic and compassionate understanding of individual experiences of loss and mourning. The "if onlys" and guilt associated with bargaining are undoubtedly real for many, but their placement within a fixed sequence remains a point of scholarly contention.

Further Reading

[Elisabeth Kubler-Ross Foundation: The Five Stages of Grief](#)

[Psychology Today: The Five Stages of Grief Revisited](#)

[National Center for Biotechnology Information \(NCBI\): Kübler-Ross's Stages of Dying and Bereavement](#)

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