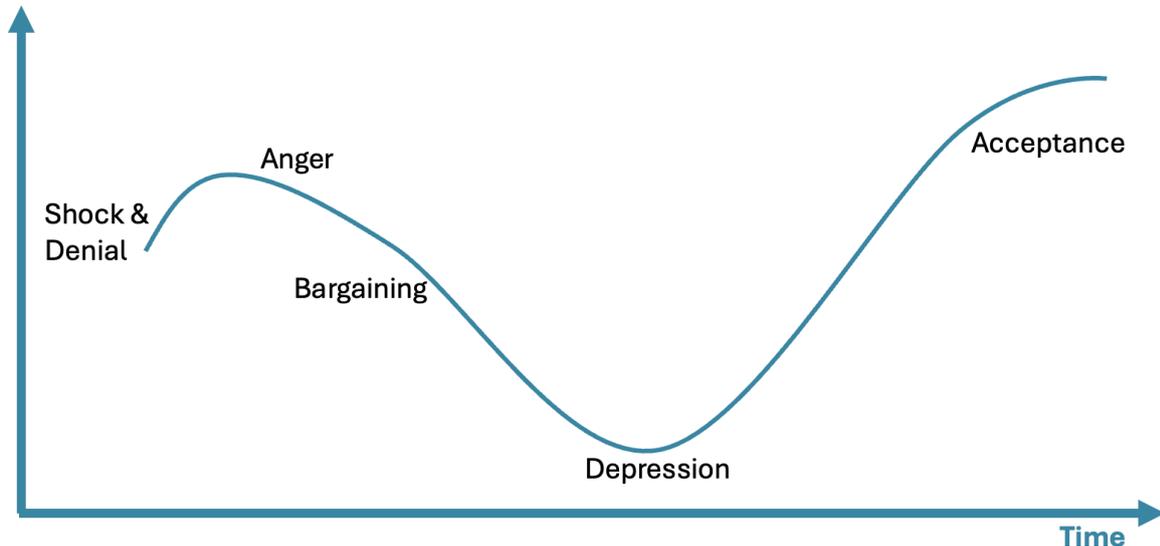


## Navigating the Grief Curve in Divorce, Separation and Significant Relationship Transitions



This chart is adapted from the five-stage model of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler), with a sequence that reflects how many people might experience separation. Grief isn't only about bereavement — it's a natural response to any significant loss. The end of a relationship can bring its own unique form of grief, often mixed with emotions that may feel different from those experienced after a death. Separation can involve the ongoing presence of the other person, which may stir feelings of hurt, betrayal, or sustained anger in ways that can be complex. For some, these emotions may be fuelled by unresolved conflicts, changes to daily life, and the loss of a future they had imagined.

This model is not a linear set of steps to complete, and it's rarely a straight path from start to finish. You may move back and forth between stages, skip some altogether, or revisit them at different times. The purpose of this guide is not to prescribe how you should feel, but to reassure you that these shifting responses are a natural part of adjusting to major change. Seeing the stages mapped out can sometimes make it easier to understand your own experience — and to know you are not alone. In therapy, we can navigate your individual process together.

### **Shock and Denial**

In the early days after a separation, it can be hard to take in what's happening. You might feel numb, disbelieving, or as if you're outside your own life watching events unfold. For some, there may be almost nothing at all at first — a blankness that can be surprising in itself. For others, shock arrives as a rush of everything all at once, such as sadness, fear, anger, confusion, shame, embarrassment, or guilt.

Shock is often experienced as part of denial — the mind's way of cushioning us from overwhelming reality. At this stage you might also experience denial more directly: a sense that it can't really be happening, that it's not happening to you, or that if you don't think about it, it might somehow undo itself. As a coping strategy, this can look very different from one person to another: for some there's a powerful urge to tell everyone, for others, to hide away when life feels as though it's unravelling — outward reactions that often reflect what's happening internally.

No way is right or wrong — they are all natural responses to what feels like a catastrophic change. For some, the mind protects by holding reality at arm's length, allowing space to process slowly. For others, it brings all the feelings forward at once so they can be faced head-on. It can even be a mixture of both at different times.

***Reflection:** There's no rush to make sense of everything straight away. In therapy, we can notice together what feelings are present — whether they come all at once or not at all — and make space for them at a pace that feels right for you.*

## **Anger**

Anger can surface at any stage in the ending of a relationship. It might flare up immediately or sit and simmer quietly in the background. You may feel it towards your former partner, yourself, others who were involved, or the situation itself.

It can be fuelled by many things — loss of trust, feeling treated unfairly, changes to family life, or the disruption of plans for the future and the life you thought you were going to have. Sometimes anger feels strong and obvious; other times it's harder to spot — showing up as irritability, sarcasm, or withdrawal. Often, it masks or blends with other feelings such as grief, fear, guilt, or sadness.

Anger is a natural and protective response when something important to us has been lost or damaged.

***Reflection:** Feeling angry doesn't mean you're not coping — it can be part of finding your way through. In therapy, we can explore what your anger might be signalling, notice what lies beneath it, and make sense of the tidal wave of emotions it can bring, acknowledging what they might mean for you.*

## **Bargaining**

*“Was I enough? Could I have done more? Could they have changed?”*

These are the kinds of questions that can echo loudly when a relationship ends — or when you know it's about to. Bargaining is often the mind's way of trying to make sense of what's happened, to find a point where things could have been different, or to hold on to the hope that things might still change.

Whether you initiated the separation or were on the receiving end, bargaining can involve looking for ways either person might reconsider, change, or fulfil broken promises — or questioning whether the overall decision to separate was right at all. It might also mean weighing the cost of staying against the cost of leaving, and imagining different versions of your future.

Bargaining isn't always about the relationship itself — it can also be about holding on to a certain version of yourself, a shared life, a working partnership, or a future you believed in. These thoughts are normal — they can be part of gently adjusting to loss by exploring *what if* before facing *what is*.

***Reflection:** Bargaining doesn't mean you're stuck in the past — it can be part of how we test the edges of a painful reality before facing what is. In therapy, we can explore the meaning behind these thoughts, notice the hopes and needs they reveal, and use them as building blocks for what comes next.*

## Depression

After the emotional intensity of earlier stages, you might expect to start feeling better — which is why this stage can be so unsettling. For many, it can feel like moving backwards. This is when the reality of the separation fully lands, and the weight of loss can leave you feeling unstable, ungrounded — as if the ground beneath you has shifted — and at times, in overwhelming despair.

You may notice a loss of energy or motivation, difficulty concentrating, changes to sleep or appetite, more frequent tears, or a desire to withdraw from others. Activities that once brought pleasure might feel flat or meaningless. It can be hard to imagine a future that feels good again, or even to put one foot in front of the other.

These feelings are a natural response to grief and loss — your mind and body's way of slowing down so you can process what's happened. For some, this stage can feel particularly heavy or isolating. If you find yourself struggling to get through daily life, or feeling hopeless, focusing on small points of light when the days feel dark can help — through moments of connection with trusted friends and family, small acts of care, or reaching out for professional support.

***Reflection:** Be kind to yourself at this stage. Feeling low and lost after a major impact doesn't wipe out the progress you've already made. We can explore together what this stage is asking of you — perhaps more rest, renewed connections, or small steps towards re-engaging with the world. Together, we can find what helps you feel anchored and supported as you move forward in your own time.*

## Acceptance

Acceptance doesn't mean you are suddenly over the end of the relationship, or that you feel happy about what has happened. It is more about reaching a place where you can acknowledge the reality of the loss without it taking up all of your emotional space.

You may find yourself able to make plans again, to imagine a future that isn't overshadowed by the separation. This can be a quiet shift rather than a dramatic moment — realising you have gone a day without dwelling on the past, or that you can talk about it without the same sting.

One way to picture loss is as a box with a hurt button inside. In the early days, the ball of loss is so big that it constantly presses the button, and the hurt feels constant and overwhelming. Over time, the ball gets smaller — it still rolls around and sometimes hits the button, but there are longer stretches, and as life grows around the loss, the impact is gentler, and recovery feels easier.

Acceptance often brings a rebalancing: looking back at the relationship with clearer eyes, recognising both its value and its limits, and allowing space for new parts of your life to take shape.

***Reflection:** Acceptance can mark the point where what has been lost is no longer at the centre of your life. It opens space for new meaning, new experiences, and a future shaped with intention. We can be curious together about how you want that future to look, and what steps might help you move towards it.*