

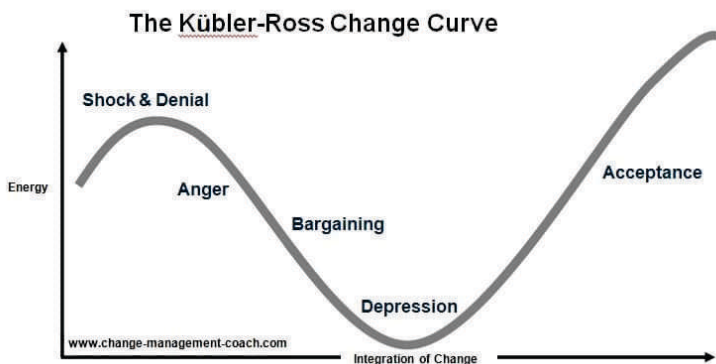


## HOW TO COPE WITH THE SHOCK AND TRAUMA OF COVID-19

If you are shocked, fearful, anxious, or just feeling uncomfortable due to this worldwide catastrophe, you are normal. These are our typical responses to major disruptions, losses and other negative events in our lives.

This is the good news. The bad news, however, is that if we cannot cope with events like these it can have a severe negative impact on our physical, psychological and mental well-being.

One way of explaining what happens to an individual during and after a traumatic event, is derived from the clinical observations of the late psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. In her work with terminally ill patients prior to death, or people who have lost a loved one, she recognized five typical stages of grief: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. This model of grief was adapted over time to apply to all significant negative changes in people's lives.



In this short summary I will explain in non-technical terms how these five stages can explain what most of us are going through in this time. I will also provide ways on how we can learn to cope with our reactions, and how to work constructively through this process of change.

Before I go into the five stages, we should keep in mind that:

We do not necessarily go through these stages one at a time and in a step-by-step manner.

We can find ourselves in different stages at different times, and even go back to earlier stages we have been in before. The stages can last for shorter or longer time periods, or even exist side by side at times. The critical factor is to hold on to the belief that we can reach the Acceptance stage, if we constructively work through the change process. Unfortunately, some individuals might get stuck in the

process, and find it impossible to move on.

### STAGE 1: SHOCK AND DENIAL

"I can't believe it!" "This can't be happening – not to me."  
"This can't be so serious; people are just over-reacting, this will pass soon."

We do not want to believe and accept that this is really happening. We already have to deal with so many challenges and uncertainties, and now this....

This is the initial stage of numbness and shock. Some of us try to pretend that this is not really happening – maybe it will go away so we can just go on with our lives. Denial is usually a temporary stage, giving us time to absorb the reality of the bad news, before we can move on to the next stage.

#### HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS SHOCK AND DENIAL:

The best proven method is to gather adequate factual information about the situation. When we do not know exactly what is happening, and avoid the truth, we are trying to fly blind through the storm. It is OK to fear the real facts, but once we can give the fear a name we can start dealing with it; if not our emotions can flow over into a state of free-flowing anxiety which is even more difficult to deal with....

Avoid getting obsessed with the situation, thinking and talking about it all the time. Avoid reading everything posted on social media, and specifically avoid fake news, by verifying the facts.

### STAGE 2: ANGER

"Why me? This is not fair!" "Who is responsible for this?" "I wish I could find the culprits and take action against them."

As soon as we realize that the "thing" is real and will affect us in some way, our denial usually change to anger. Now we get angry, even aggressive, and start looking for someone or something to blame. This anger can be directed at the people who started spreading the virus. We typically direct our anger at the "authorities" who are not doing enough to eliminate the spreading of the virus; being it the government, disobedient citizens, or even God or a higher power.

We can become frustrated and irritated with colleagues, and even our own family members; finding fault with small trivial things.



## HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS ANGER:

It is important to get through this negative emotion and behaviour as quickly as possible. Anger is poisonous: to yourself and to people around you. Tell yourself that it was OK to feel angry, but that it will not help you to deal with the situation.

There are various ways to get rid of the anger and the toxic adrenaline in your system, leading to the Fight, Flight, or Freeze reactions. Physical exercise of any kind will help your system to get rid of the excessive adrenaline (if other people can run a marathon on their balcony, stop blaming your passiveness on the gym being closed!). Get constructive, explore new activities, work on your list of to-do's, practice stress management techniques, engage in mindful meditation, do normal yoga exercises — just consult dr Google for various proven ways of pursuing this and then JUST DO IT!!

## STAGE 3: BARGAINING

“Just let me and my family survive this.” “I will do anything if this will just pass.” “I promise I will never take things for granted again.”

We start bargaining in order to try and put off the change, or to find a way out of the situation, as we now start to realize that the change and the consequences thereof is inevitable. Most of this bargaining are secret deals with God, a higher power, or even with life itself: “I promise I will lead a better life if this just goes away...”.

Unfortunately, this bargaining does not work – at least not now. For some religious individuals this can spark a crisis in their faith and beliefs.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH THE DISAPPOINTMENT FOLLOWING ON OUR BARGAINING:

It is normal to use this tactic: often in our lives we got out of difficult situations with negotiations and promises. But this a time to be honest with yourself and realize that this is not going to necessarily help this time, or just now because we want it. Of course, this does not imply that one should stop praying to God or other higher power. Instead, case studies show that a strong belief in the power of prayer and mortification can be a stronghold for many people experiencing a testing time of ordeal.

Fact of the matter is that we cannot bargain with a virus. We must distinguish between our faith, religion or spiritual beliefs, and our own responsibility to do the best we can to

help curb the spreading of this enemy.

Since people will in a short time period realize the futility of this bargaining with an inanimate and invisible force, some of them will become disillusioned and experience feelings of helplessness.

## STAGE 4: DEPRESSION

“I am losing all hope.” “I feel sad and without energy, I don't know how I am going to survive this.” “This is just going to get worse.”

At this stage in the process we become aware of everything we are losing or stand to lose (our freedom, our income and savings, even our health and lives). Some individuals start questioning the sense and purpose of life, and even lose the willpower to try and survive.

This behaviour can negatively affect other people in our lives, at home and in the workplace. Individuals with a history of depressive behaviour can get stuck in feelings of despair and hopelessness.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH YOUR OWN AND OTHERS' FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION:

First of all, remember that any person can sometimes be down or sad for various reasons. This means that we should be careful not to label ourselves or anybody else with “Depression” without a professional diagnosis. However, if the feelings of sadness do not get better, even with a good support system and enough TLC, the individual should find some kind of professional/pastoral counselling. This can, under the current circumstances, be online. Helplines and references on the internet will provide more information.

Should the symptoms persist or get worse, for example disturbed sleeping patterns, eating disorders, lack of energy, feelings of hopelessness, and emotional instability; the individual should seek psychiatric or psychological help. It may be necessary to use appropriate medication and get psychotherapy to alleviate the symptoms, and muster the energy to get constructively active again.

The worst thing to tell a person who feels seriously depressed, is that the sun is shining and the person should just pull him/herself together.....for a depressed individual the sun is not shining. Period. This person needs empathy and support, and coaching to work through this difficult stage of the process.



## STAGE 5: ACCEPTANCE

“I can’t escape this, I might as well prepare myself for it.” “It will be OK, somehow we will survive this.” “Let me think about the best options available, and start putting a plan together on how to best deal with the changed reality.”

When the individual has worked through the stage of helplessness and depression, he or she start to realize that somehow one must go on. This is not always a happy stage, since acceptance can still hold some resistance against the change.

The philosophy of the Serenity Prayer has been of help to people who need more perspective: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

### HOW TO GET TO ACTIVE ACCEPTANCE AND GROW

By this time the individual should have exhausted all four the other stages, and come to the conclusion that the only option left is to move forward, even against the odds. Once a person’s mindset has changed, the road ahead may not be paved and there might be reluctance to engage actively with the new reality.

The support and encouragement of others can help to pull the person forward and start eating the proverbial elephant bit by bit. Small achievements will serve as reinforcement that, in some ways, we can still be in control. This is especially true with regard to our thinking and thought processes, as we are not what we think we are, we ARE what we THINK!

There are numerous good sources of information to help with this “reprogramming” needed to adjust to the new situation. Reading about and practicing techniques on how to regain my resilience and self-confidence can create new opportunities for personal growth as a result of the process I had to work through.

DR CHRIS VAN DER WATT

PSYCHOLOGIST

TAKE THE **FIRST** STEP TOWARDS A **BALANCED LIFE**  
AND CONTACT US

**WELLNESS@LAFERM.CO.ZA**