



Whirlpool of Grief

The Whirlpool of Grief was developed by a doctor who worked closely with parents who had experienced the death of their child¹. His work showed him that each person experiences loss uniquely, and individuals and families do not move step by step through stages in a predictable way. He developed the Whirlpool of Grief as a way of talking about the feelings and experiences that people can have after death.

This picture story (on the next page) shows how a person could happily be rowing a boat along the **River of Life** and then suddenly (unexpectedly) fall down the **Waterfall of Bereavement** into the **Whirlpool of Grief** below. The whirlpool carries you round and round, bringing you back to the same emotions again and again. Occasionally, you can find rest in the **shallow water** but you also face the risk of being thrown against the **rocks**.

The time spent in the whirlpool, the period of disorganised and intense feelings that go round and round, will not be the same for everyone. Some people who have been washed up on the side of the river will choose to stay there, they are afraid to get back into the water. But when the time is right, when people are ready, the River of Life leads away from the whirlpool to **calmer waters**.

It is possible that you will feel like you have never just happily rowed your boat along the calm waters of the River of Life. Perhaps you feel like you have been going from waterfall to waterfall because you have experienced so many losses. Even if this is true, some waterfalls will be higher than others, some whirlpools will be stronger and more difficult to get out of than others, (i.e., some losses will have a bigger emotional impact on you than others) and there will be times in between where the water in the River of Life (life) is relatively calmer.

In your own words, what do you understand the stages to mean?

¹ Wilson R. Lecture handout from Child and Death International Conference, Edinburgh, 1992. Adapted.

