Size Acceptance as a Grief Process

The dissonance between wanting to believe we can control the size of our bodies and experiencing the biological reality that we cannot, ultimately resolves in one of two ways. The first is self-blame and leads to further shame and isolation...The second option is to accept the body as it really is. Awareness is one small step on the path to size acceptance and its corollary, self-acceptance. When you let go of the idea of control, you experience loss. Attending to the grief that accompanies this loss is part of the healing process.

The First Stage: Denial “No, not me” and “It cannot be true” (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
- Continue to diet despite acknowledging that sustained weight loss is impossible for most people.
- Cling to a belief that sustained weight loss is a realistic goal for anyone who tries hard enough.
- Detachment or disassociation from the body (existing from the neck up) – aware of calories but not hunger or feelings
- Goals – Detach your worthiness from a number on the scale, increase body connection (breathing/body scan), increase awareness of the damage dieting does (It’s not your fault).

The Second Stage: Anger “Why me?” (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
- Feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment
- Anger turns inward if you blame yourself and not the diets
- Compulsive overeating used to soothe or express self-loathing
- Self-loathing & the goal of self-deprivation lead to pathologization of any eating driven by emotional needs
- Compulsive dieting to avoid body shaming from others
- Goal – Give external focus to internalized anger (It’s not your fault!).

The Third Stage: Bargaining
- “If we have been unable to face the sad facts in the first period and have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of agreement which may postpone the inevitable from happening.” (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
- In terms of size acceptance, the inevitable happening is letting go of the wish for control
- Cycle of failing and bargaining – often repeats for many years
- Attempts to regain a semblance of power to counteract a mounting sense of failure
- Finding new rationales, seemingly unrelated to appearance, for continuing efforts to control and shape your body (ie, “health” – beware of moral overtones)
- Goal – Explore your body story, experiences of body shame, and heal the wounds (therapy, write a letter to your body)
The Fourth Stage: Depression
• Reactive depression: unrealistic guilt or shame that can often be alleviated with reassurances.
• Preparatory depression is necessary to facilitate acceptance of a loss. “People in this phase are grateful for those who can sit with them…without constantly telling them not to be sad.” (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
• Goal – Develop an awareness of how weight-bias and stigma affect all of people; fat or thin. Look for body positive role models to regain a sense of empowerment.

The Fifth Stage: Acceptance
• Neither depressed nor angry about an inevitable loss. (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
• Opinions and actions of others do not preoccupy you.
• Size is not seen as a reason to delay activities you want to try.
• No longer require external definitions of what normal eating behavior is supposed to be.