

Case Study Report: The Five Stages of Death in *WandaVision*

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Grief is an experience every human being will go through at some point in their lifetimes. Dealing with death is an inescapable and inevitable part of life. Everyone experiences grief differently depending on a variety of factors such as the expectancy of the death, the bereaved individual's relationship with the deceased, and the cause of death. To better contextualize how grief works and understand how people deal with life after loss, many anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, and communication scholars alike have composed multiple approaches in order to define grief as a phenomenon. One of these approaches is pretty familiar to those of western culture: Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief. The Five Stages of Grief have become a popular contemporary approach to understanding how people live through their grief. In fact, the approach is applicable to many depictions of the grieving process in popular culture, especially in that of the 2021 mini-series *WandaVision*. *WandaVision*'s depiction of the bereaved character of Wanda Maximoff demonstrates Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's approach of the Five Stages of Grief by using Wanda's magical abilities to reflect her grieving process in each of these stages.

In order to demonstrate how *WandaVision* displays the Five Stages of Grief, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the series' plot. The mini-series aired on the Disney+ streaming platform in 2021 following the events of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame*. The show follows Wanda Maximoff as she grieves the loss of her partner Vision who died gruesomely in *Endgame*. In *WandaVision*, Wanda has created a false reality,

which will also be referred to as the “hex,” in the town of Westview, New Jersey. Within Wanda’s hex, she has materialized an alive version of Vision using her magical powers and are married to each other. Further down the line within the plot of the show, Wanda is also able to magically conceive and give birth to two children that only exist within her hexed reality. The hex is delivered in the style of classic television sitcoms transforming through the decades referencing shows from the 1950s to the 2000s such as *I Love Lucy*, *Bewitched*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Full House*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, and *Modern Family*. By referencing the styles present in each of these decade-defining sitcoms, the hex becomes a clear site of exposing Wanda’s deep-rooted denial.

Denial is an important aspect of grief to examine within this context as it is the first stage Kubler-Ross designates to her Five Stages of Grief approach. It is important to note that Kubler-Ross originally designed the approach to be utilized with terminally ill patients whose care had come to the point where it was no longer possible to mitigate their illness. In layman's terms, the Five Stages of Grief were designed to prepare those who were about to face death and help them come to terms with it. Even though this was Kubler-Ross’s original intent with the approach, it has been adopted by grief counselors and psychologists to instead help the bereaved process grief over their deceased. This application to the bereaved is essential in understanding how the showrunners depict Wanda’s grieving process. The Five Stages of Grief as designed by Kubler-Ross and as demonstrated in *WandaVision* are as follows: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It is also important to note that while all of these stages might be experienced by an individual, the weight at which each stage is experienced can greatly vary and come in waves. Wanda is depicted as experiencing each stage, but as this case study will point out, there

are more obvious examples of some stages over others and some overlap demonstrating the interconnectedness of the stages.

The first stage of grief, denial, is immediately apparent in the first episode of *WandaVision*. Denial is a result of the bereaved not wanting to believe or having difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the deceased is actually gone. Viewers are introduced to the show in black and white where Wanda and Vision have a classic 1950s home together. Those familiar with the context that Vision died in *Endgame* would be confused as to how Vision is on their television screens, but this is then revealed as a result of Wanda's hexed reality. Her denial leads to her creating this reality as a defense mechanism against the immense pain and grief she feels after having lost Vision. Denial is evident in her creation of the hex and her creation of a version of Vision in the hex as she can be in full control of the events happening around them. This allows her to keep the one she loves safe and far from the grasp of death. Another factor that reveals Wanda's denial is that not only does she essentially resurrect Vision, but in her hex she and Vision are married and live a stable, normal life. Denial also runs throughout the show as Wanda will rewind things or cut things out like she is editing the show if something seems amiss or does not align with her reality built out of denial.

Denial, in turn, leads to the next stage of grief—anger. Anger comes about when something or someone threatens to break through the bereaved individual's state of denial. Wanda's anger especially comes out when Monica Rambeau, an individual agent from outside the hex, manages to bring up Wanda's history of dealing with loss in her life. For example, when Monica and Wanda sit down to have a conversation, Monica references how Wanda's twin brother,

Pietro, died tragically in the real world. Immediately, Wanda realizes that Monica has not been put under her spell and becomes angry. Wanda retaliates and expresses her anger by using her powers to physically blast and cast out Monica from her hex. This instance of anger in Wanda demonstrates how anger in the Five Stages of Grief is often a result of the attempt to dismantle the bereaved individual's denial.

From anger comes bargaining—the third stage. Bargaining as a stage in the bereaved occurs when the individual going through the grieving process is starting to realize they don't have control over the situation and are battling between their denial and their acceptance. In *WandaVision*, bargaining happens in two very distinct moments. One particular moment the audience witnesses an instance of Wanda's bargaining is when she steps outside of her hex to confront the agents from the Sentient World Observation and Response Department (S.W.O.R.D.). These agents have been attempting to infiltrate and take down her hexed reality, and as a result, Wanda's anger with them leads to her bargaining with them. In episode 5 of *WandaVision*, she confronts the S.W.O.R.D. operation and tells them, "This will be your only warning. Stay out of my home. You don't bother me, I don't bother you" (2021). While this statement of Wanda's has threatening undertones (demonstrating how anger often leads to bargaining), it is clear that she is struggling to retain her control over the hex, and therefore over her state of denial. Wanda's bargaining again reveals itself when she gets into an argument with Vision over her hex. Vision has come to realize that people are trapped inside of Wanda's reality and that he isn't "really" Vision. While Vision is threatening her state of denial, Wanda loves Vision so she struggles with how to confront this. She insists she doesn't really understand how everything is happening (which is somewhat true since she does not have a full grasp on her

magical abilities). She is also persistent that it is out of love for their family they have in the hex. Her argument with Vision demonstrates the conflict of losing control while also wanting to keep control in her denial-built reality.

The fatigue of trying to maintain a sense of control within denial leads to the fourth stage of depression. Depression in Wanda comes to the surface in Episode 7 where the audience sees Wanda visibly disheveled. She showcases typical signs of depression such as not wanting to get out of bed, struggling to eat, and becoming distant in giving attention to her kids. The episode also features a “commercial” as a part of the hex sitcom that advertises an antidepressant:

Feeling depressed? Like the world goes on without you? Do you just want to be left alone? Ask your doctor about Nexus: a unique antidepressant that works to anchor you back to your reality, or the reality of your choice! Side effects include feeling your feelings, confronting your truth, seizing your destiny, and possibly more depression. You should not take Nexus unless your doctor has cleared you to move on with your life. (*WandaVision*, 2021, ep. 7)

This commercial alone is an excellent example of depression as a stage of Wanda’s journey through the Five Stages of Grief. It clearly references how Wanda has been feeling like “the world goes on without” her as she is very alone in her grief. The reference to being “anchored” back to reality alludes to how depression in the Five Stages of Grief is, like all of the in-between stages, tied back to the struggle of maintaining denial. “Side effects” such as “confronting your truth” illustrates this further as it is all rooted in Wanda’s denial. Wanda’s depression is a result

of the tiring nature of trying to maintain a state of denial while also struggling to magically maintain a reality built from that denial.

Finally, at the end of *WandaVision*, Wanda reaches the final stage of acceptance. Acceptance happens in the bereaved individual when they come to accept the reality of their loss and are no longer in denial. A major player in her reaching acceptance is when Agatha Harkness, another witch in Wanda's hex, forces Wanda to relive the moments of her life when she had to face loss and how she grew in her power each time. Within this flashback-travel sequence is a scene where Vision comforts Wanda after the loss of her brother. Vision delivers the iconic quote, "What is grief, if not love persevering?" (*WandaVision*, 2021, ep. 8). By having to face her reality head on and how she has been able to persevere through each hardship in her life, Wanda is able to reach acceptance and take down her hex. With her acceptance, Wanda has to say goodbye to her created version of Vision and her children. Reaching acceptance is the catalyst that allows Wanda to then start really exploring her powers as the Scarlet Witch and discover what she is capable of while controlling and understanding her abilities better. Acceptance in the bereaved, as depicted by Wanda, signifies the release of denial.

WandaVision artfully displays Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief throughout the series.

Wanda's grief is extremely complicated and leads to an intense experience of denial which triggers the Kubler-Ross cycle. Even though the Five Stages of Grief were originally designed to work with terminally ill patients, the use of this cycle to understand how bereaved individuals process grief, as depicted in *WandaVision*, can help other bereaved people and their support systems better understand what they are feeling and why they are behaving in certain ways

while grieving. While *WandaVision* closes with Wanda reaching acceptance, her process of grieving can continue to be explored in the more recent title *Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness* as she searches for her children in other universes. By continuing her story in this way, the writers of her character demonstrate how the Five Stages of Grief are cyclical and reaching acceptance is a gradual journey.

References

Schaeffer et al. (Writers), & Shakman, M. (Director). (2021). Fiege et al (Executive Producers), *WandaVision*. Marvel Studios.