The five stages of grief towards accepting a rejection letter

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Soldiering on in scientific publishing

Rejection is common in science, mostly from publication before graduation, and from both publication and grant application after graduating from the doctoral program. Based on observations during the 3 years of my doctoral studies (not necessarily my own experience), using the Kübler-Ross model on the five stages of grief,[1] I have identified a set of characteristics associated with receiving a rejection letter from a scientific journal (Box).

If any of these characteristics reminds you of a certain colleague in your department or laboratory, it is important that you treat them with kindness, compassion and respect. Perhaps, an occasional surprise muffin with peppermint tea (not necessarily my preference) may help them go through the grieving process more smoothly. Future studies need to explore potential intervention or management options to help hasten the grieving process and to help ensure survival through the five stages of grief.

Competing interests: The author has no competing interests ... Although she may or may not have a small collection of rejection letters from some scientific journals (just a few). When writing this manuscript, she had not been rejected by *The MJA* — yet — and hopes that this continues to be the case. ■

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References are available online at www.mja.com.au.

Kübler-Ross model on the five stages of grief

Stage 1: Denial

- Re-reading the decision letter over and over again to make sure it really says "I regret to inform you ..." and not "I am pleased to inform you ..."
- Re-reading the decision letter to look for other markers of a rejection letter, such as "careful consideration", "we only accept *n* % of submitted articles", and "not a reflection on the quality of your work", just in case they typed "not accept" instead of "accept" by mistake
- Pinching yourself in the face to make sure it is not a bad dream, since you have had it before

Stage 2: Anger

- Re-reading the rejection letter and criticising it for lack of compassion and logic. How can there be "space constraints" in the era of online publication? And "we receive a high volume of submissions each week" is just ... [censored]
- Having an extended lunch break with your colleagues to criticise the whole system of scientific journal publication
- Thinking that it was all reviewer two's fault. Maybe if you can find their contact details ...
- Planning to spam the journal submission system with 100/*n* copies of the manuscript since, according to the rejection letter, only *n* % of the submitted articles are eventually accepted for publication

Stage 3: Bargaining

- Writing a rejection of rejection letter, as suggested by Chapman and Slade[2]
- Thinking about what would have happened if you had used American instead of British spelling, maybe Times New Roman was not a good font choice, maybe the submission date was not a good day on your Chinese lunar calendar, or maybe your office has bad Feng Shui
- Thinking that perhaps it's karma from recommending the rejection of that paper you just peer reviewed for another journal

Stage 4: Depression

- Deleting your rejection of rejection letter draft; what is the point really? What is the point of doing research? What is the point of life?
- Taking a long hot shower, singing *Welcome to my life*, *Because of you*, *Bleeding love*, and the list continues (it is a long shower)

Stage 5: Acceptance

- Realising that you are too far into the game to quit now, and that you are not giving up the whole forest for one tree
- Revising and reformatting your manuscript for submission to another journal, while listening to songs such as *I will survive* and *Go the distance*
- Printing and framing the rejection letter, just in case you become the next JK Rowling
- Channelling your negative energy into something useful, such as writing your experience about dealing with rejection letters in an article ◆

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1 Kübler-Ross E. On death and dying. New York: Macmillan; 1969.

2 Chapman C, Slade T. Rejection of rejection: a novel approach to overcoming barriers to publication. *BMJ* 2015; 351: h6326. ■