

The Four Tasks of Grieving

Task 1: To accept the reality of the loss is the first and often one of the most painful tasks that grieving loved ones must complete in order to begin the long journey toward healing. To *accept the reality* means that one must grasp and accept the true meaning of the loss. It means realizing that their loved one is not going to return as if they were on an extended trip. It involves knowing the circumstances of the death to the fullest extent possible. The real meaning of death is that it is NOT reversible. Until one fully understands and accepts that the loved one will not return, there is little need or desire to adjust to the loss.

Task 2: To experience the pain is only fully accomplished after one is aware of the finality of the loss. The pain which is caused by the loss of a beloved family member or friend is real pain and must be experienced and handled in a healthy manner. It is impossible to lose someone you have been deeply attached to without experiencing pain. Well-meaning friends, and society in general, will go to great lengths to protect you from experiencing this pain. Doctors will often give sedatives or tranquilizers as a means of taking off the edge of the pain. Friends, family members, and even clergy will change the subject if they become aware that you are beginning to tear up during a conversation fearing that it may be too painful for you to talk about the death. Others, honestly thinking that they are helping, will avoid using the name of the deceased even though you may try repeatedly to talk about your loved one.

Mourners do not need to be masochists, inflicting unnecessary pain upon themselves, however it is impossible to avoid this pain and sadness. To deny it or try to escape it will only postpone a necessary part of grief. The true friend is that person who will allow you to express your feelings and talk about your loss, even though it may hurt and bring on tears. Never be ashamed of your tears! They are appropriate and need to be shed.

Task 3: To adjust to the changed environment from which the loved one is missing. For many this adjustment will major role changes and responsibilities for the grieving family. These changes may be in the form of the new roles to be acquired or learned such as assuming responsibilities for the care of children, handling finances, or taking care of the automobile or plumbing problems. Changes may include the loss of the familiar role as “caretaker” for a loved one before their death or the role of “parent” following the death of a child.

These forced changes influence the grief reaction and affect the difficulty of one’s grief. The greater the changes, the more adjustments that one must make. It is a difficult task to learn new skills and adjusting to new lifestyles.

There are several suggestions which you may find helpful as you complete Task 3:

- Realize that it sometimes takes several months before you will be aware of all of the changes resulting from the loss.
- Learning new roles and acquiring new skills may be a long and slow process. Be patient with yourself. Allow yourself time to learn and develop the necessary skills.
- Learning new skills is difficult. Don't be afraid or ashamed to ask for help. If you were learning to use a typewriter or computer you would ask for help. Learning new roles in life following a death is much more difficult.
- Keep in mind that you may learn to like the new skills and roles acquired in adjusting to your changed environment, even if you hated the changes in the beginning. For instance, the person who must learn to handle the family finances may reach the point where they actually enjoy the freedom and control which it brings them.

Task 4: To withdraw the emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in another person or cause. This is not to say that we stop loving the person who has died nor do we want to forget them. This task simply means that we have healed to the extent that we are free to live life to its fullest once again. We now know that we can love another person and not love the person who has died any less. The love may, and most likely will, be different from the previous love. Some people find that they withdraw the energy from the deceased and invest it in a cause or task which has meaning for them. An example of this would be the mother who lost a teenage daughter because of a drunk driver, devoting her energies to the founding of M.A.D.D. (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers).

Again it is important to remember that one must complete these tasks as Worden has defined them. There are no short cuts to the grief process. Sometimes, in an attempt to shorten the time needed to get through the grief work or to escape some of the tasks, a survivor may move ahead to a more comfortable task. For instance, a young mother may try to complete Task 4 before Task 3. She may be heard saying something to the effect of, "I am not interested in a new mate for myself as much as in finding a father for my children." Another example would be the person who quickly moves into a new relationship (Task 4), as a way of avoiding the pain of being alone (Task 2).

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