

The Four Tasks of Grief

Task #1: To accept the reality of the loss

This task involves coming to terms with the end of the person's life. It is not uncommon to experience shock or disbelief following a loss, or feel as if you are living in a dream or surreal reality. Your mind can easily pretend that the death didn't really happen in an attempt to avoid the pain. You might continually expect your loved one to walk through the door, or be on the other end of the phone when it rings. You might keep telling yourself that this has to be a nightmare that you'll soon wake up from.

To many, "acceptance" often implies agreement or approval. To others, "acceptance" may imply severing ties to the past. Acceptance doesn't have to mean any of this. Rather, in the case of losing a loved one, acceptance may simply mark the moment we are ready to begin our journey of healing. Engaging in rituals such as funerals or writing a letter to the person who has died, or talking to a therapist or a close friend or family member are helpful ways to start to come to terms with the reality of the situation.

Task #2: To work through the pain and grief

Grief naturally is accompanied by a wide range of intense emotions such as sadness, longing, emptiness, loneliness, anger, numbness, anxiety, and confusion. This part of the grieving process is considered to be adaptive by many specialists in the field of grief and loss. I tell my clients that ironically, the prescription for grief is to grieve. In my experience I have seen that despite best efforts, there is no way to "get around" grief; we have to be willing to go through it in order to get to the other side.

The grieving process can cause complete exhaustion, sore muscles, loss of appetite, and difficulty focusing and making decisions. It is important that you are patient with yourself and allow all of these feelings to wash over you in order to process them. It is during this time especially that we need to focus on good self-care such as eating well, incorporating physical activity into your routine, sleeping and spending time with others who you feel comfortable with.

Task #3: To adjust to a new environment

Gradually, (or in some cases quickly), you will start to resume your normal routine. Students will have to go back to school, and adults will have to either go back to work or continue to engage in community activities. Over time you may come to realize the different roles that your loved one performed – either external or internal. Worden acknowledges that adjusting to an environment without the deceased can mean different things to different people depending on the relationship of the person who has died, as well as the roles that are impacted by the loss. The task of readjustment happens over an extended period of time, and can require internal adjustments, external adjustments and spiritual adjustments.

Accomplishing this task requires learning an array of new skills and tasks (ranging from bill paying, parenting, living alone, etc) and redefining how you see yourself without the other person. This task also requires learning to ask for help when needed and identifying resources available to you.

Task #4: To find and enduring connection with the deceased while moving forward with life

This task includes finding an appropriate, ongoing connection in our emotional lives with the person who has died, while allowing us to continue living. Like the other tasks, this can mean varying things to each one of us. But, it often means allowing for thoughts and memories, while simultaneously engaging in the activities that are meaningful to us and that bring us pleasure. This may even include new activities, people or new relationships.

For Worden, not accomplishing this task is to not live. It is important to remember that life did not stop when the person died, and that it is important for us to continue to live our lives with a sense of purpose and meaning. In my experience, this task continues to be a goal to strive for – perhaps for the rest of your life. When you are ready, you can choose to begin to find a new way forward in life while incorporating the deep profound love we still feel – and always will.

Worden, W. (2008). Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, 4th ed.