

Worden's Four Tasks of Grief

Recent thinking about the process of grief and mourning is moving away from a fixed stage model, in which everyone goes through the same stages of loss in a fixed order, to more flexible “phase” or “task” models. In these models, persons may move through tasks in different orders, or work on several at the same time, or even revisit tasks that felt “completed” earlier. Among the most well-known task models of mourning is that of J. William Worden. What follows is a brief summary of the tasks as he sees them.

1. **To Accept the Reality of the Loss.** When someone dies, there is always a sense that it hasn't happened. The first task of mourning involves recognizing, both emotionally and intellectually, that the person is dead and will not return. Traditional rituals, such as funerals, help many people move towards accepting the death as real.
2. **To Process the Pain of Grief.** Society offers us many opportunities to avoid the intense pain that the loss of a loved one can bring. Processing the pain of grief helps prevent people from carrying pain into the future, where it might be more difficult to work through. Being with supportive people who validate our feelings helps us to address our pain.
3. **To Adjust to a World Without the Deceased.** The loss of a loved one requires us to make external, internal and spiritual adjustments. Externally, we find we must fill roles and perform tasks that the deceased did. Internally, we must adjust our own sense of self in the absence of our day to day relationship with the loved one. Spiritually, a death can challenge our fundamental assumptions about the world and lead us to feel without a direction in life. Adjusting to the fact that the deceased is no longer physically with us allows us to move forward after the death.
4. **To Find an Enduring Connection With the Deceased in the Midst of Embarking on a New Life.** In this task, the mourner's challenge is to find a way to stay connected to the deceased, but without preventing her or him from going on with life. It is not that the deceased is forgotten, but that the bereaved finds enjoyment in life again, while allowing themselves access to memories, feelings and thoughts that they have of their loved one.

There is no set time line to completing these tasks, although they generally occur over months or years, not days or weeks. Worden points out that while it is essential to address these tasks to adjust to a loss, not every loss we experience challenges us in the same way. If you find a death is challenging you beyond your ability to cope with it, getting support from family, friends, clergy or a professional may help.