

The First Task of Mourning:

Accepting the Reality of the Loss



The Four Tasks of Mourning are a framework for understanding grief based on the research and practical experience of therapist and psychology professor William Worden, Ph.D. Any grieving person can attest to what Worden's research has shown- the grief journey is not linear, but rather a winding road. Worden identified four separate tasks to help fully integrate the experience of bereavement into your life and for "equilibrium to be reestablished." The tasks do not have to be addressed in order and there is no set time frame; you may even revisit certain tasks over time.

The First Task is to *accept the reality of the loss*. Denial is commonly the first "side effect" of a death for the surviving family and friends. People often wonder how someone who was here yesterday can suddenly be gone forever. Accepting that a loved one is physically gone is a crucial part of beginning the grief journey. Here are some ways that may help you accept the reality of a loss.

- **Accept that you may not have an explanation for why this happened to your loved one.** Sometimes there is no answer to the question "why?" This is especially true when a death is sudden or the person who died is young. In searching for an explanation, the family may ask themselves: "Why did this happen to us? Why, of all the people in the world, did my loved one have to die? What could we have done differently?" While you may not have answers for the why, you can ask yourself: "What does it mean to me that this has happened? How do I feel about this experience? How can I incorporate this death into the story of my life?" Exploring your experience of the death may, over time, help you create your own understanding of the experience.
- **Participate in rituals and activities that acknowledge the death.** Viewing the body after the death gives you a chance to say goodbye and may help you in accepting the reality of the loss. Physically seeing that the person is dead can help to solidify that the person is gone. Rituals like funerals, burials, memorial services, a wish paper release, floating flower petals down a river, and the spreading of ashes can also be helpful in coming to terms with the reality of the death.
- **Acknowledge the significance of your loss.** Some people downplay their grief in hopes that it will make the death easier to accept, but it is important to remember what that person meant to you.
- **Establish a support system.** This can be especially helpful in the first few days and weeks following the death. The people in your support system, such as family, friends, faith-based practitioners and colleagues, can help you accept, both intellectually and emotionally, that the person is dead and will not return.
- **Talk about it.** Talk to your family, friends, counselors, therapists, even strangers, if that helps. Find someone who is a good listener. Hearing yourself talk about the death and your grief can allow the reality of your loss to sink in. Some need to tell the same story over and over again in order to fully come to terms with it. When you're ready, consider taking it a step further and begin speaking, and even thinking, about the deceased in the past tense.
- **Find someone who can relate.** Especially if the death is due to suicide, overdose, or other traumatizing means, it may be harder for you to accept. Similarly with miscarriages, many parents struggle with mourning the child they never got the chance to meet. Find someone who can remind you that your grief is normal and valid. If you cannot find someone who can relate, find a good friend who will listen.
- **Find an appropriate way and time to memorialize the person.** People vary in terms of how they acknowledge the person that died. Some families find great comfort in having an area with photos and memorabilia in their home





dedicated to the person that died. Some families find it painful to have the deceased's belongings prominently visible and quickly pack things away. Have a family discussion as to what would work best for your family. If opinions differ, see if compromises can be made that allow everyone's needs to be met. For example, if not every family member is comfortable with a display in the public areas of the house, maybe something can be put up in one person's bedroom instead.

When considering any of these suggestions, remember that no two losses are the same. Just because someone else was able to accept a death in a short period of time does not mean the same applies to you. You will complete the First Task of Mourning in your own time and in your own way.

Further Reading:

- *Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?: Explaining sudden death to very young children in words they can understand* by Elke and Alex Barber
- *Healing Through the Dark Emotions* by Miriam Greenspan
- *Life After Loss* by Bob Deits
- *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Therese Rando

References:

- Worden, J. (2008). *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (4th ed.). New York, New York: Springer Publishing.
- Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning. (2013, June 24). Retrieved February 24, 2016, from <http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/wordens-four-tasks-of-mourning/>

