

# Four Tasks of Mourning

## FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning organize healing in grief and create links among those who are grieving. The tasks can help us reduce feelings of being overwhelmed and hopeless in grief by giving us phases to strive towards. Grief is work. It's not a passive process just about waiting for "time to healing your wounds," and grief and grief tasks can take much longer to work through than others may expect. Grief is life-long! These tasks are not a step-by-step model; think of them more as a web where the tasks may overlap each other.

### Task I

#### Helping People with Special Needs Accept the Reality of the Loss

People with special needs may need help understanding that their loved one really has died and will not come back. This reality is something that does not happen in one moment, but takes time—sometimes years. Both the head and the heart must accept this, and as that happens the death can be dealt with on an emotional level. Protest and disbelief are normal and healthy, and they may need to be told repeatedly about the death.

It is not unusual for you or your family member to hear the phone ring and hope it is your loved one calling or plan to tell your deceased loved one about something that happened before remembering that they died.

The goal of the first task is to help everyone gently comprehend that the loss is permanent and irreversible.

#### Ways to Help

- **Engage in traditional rituals.** Traditional rituals, such as funerals, help them begin to accept the death as real. Visiting the cemetery/place of burial and talking about the deceased can also help.
- **Talk about grief.** Teach them what "grief" means and what is normal and help them explore their personal grief reactions. There are many books on grief and loss available to help you with these discussions.
- **Use the words "death" and "died"** rather than "passed away" or phrases like "God needed an angel in heaven." These euphemisms about death can be confusing, especially for people with special needs.
- **Discuss the cause of death.** Provide accurate, concrete information about what caused the death (e.g., "his heart stopped beating and the rest of his body stopped working, too").
- **Have patient and answer questions.** You may be asked the same questions again and again. Sometimes they are testing and hoping there will be a different answer if they ask enough times. Have patience and answer these same questions over and over.
- **Be in spaces shared with the deceased.** Being in these spaces (perhaps a room in the house, a restaurant, a park) can be helpful. Some people are afraid or uncomfortable with these places, but keep gently revisiting them over time.
- **Allow them to process in their own way.** People with special needs may need to process their feelings and experiences in ways other than by just talking (with toys, storytelling, etc.); allow for this and encourage when appropriate.

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### Task II

#### Helping Your Family Work Through the Pain and Feelings of Grief and Finding Healthy Outlets

The death of someone special creates pain, often at an intensity that has not been felt before. Pain may be felt on physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual levels. This pain must also be expressed in many ways. Individuals and family members experience and express the intensity of the pain in ways that are unique to each person. You may notice some family members are more comfortable crying or talking about the deceased and sharing stories about memories. You may notice others feeling angry, feeling physical sensations in their bodies, or not showing outward signs of grief but processing grief internally, such as having dreams about the deceased. All of these expressions of grief are healthy and normal, and there is no one “right” way to grieve.

Healing in grief means confronting this pain and finding ways to express it safely. Your family member may choose to express their pain with others or alone. It is tempting to try and avoid the pain by “moving on” or “putting the past behind you” or finding a way to take a shortcut around the pain, such as trying not to talk about it. However, the pain eventually will return until it is expressed, as often and as long as needed. Often when additional losses are experienced or when special days or anniversaries pass, the intensity of pain may surge.

#### Ways to Help

- **Communicate that all feelings are okay.** Communicate verbally as well as through your body language that all feelings are okay, even complicated feelings like guilt, anger, and shame. It’s how we choose to release our feelings (i.e., safely) that matters.
- **Use guidelines.** Releasing feelings is okay as long as you don’t hurt yourself, don’t hurt others, and don’t break things that aren’t okay to be broken (e.g., lamps aren’t okay to break, but an egg carton is okay to break).
- **Discover creative ways to express your pain.** Try ripping newspapers or phone books, throwing ice or eggs in the woods, journaling, or drawing.
- **Cry.** Let the tears flow when they come. Don’t apologize for them. Let them stop on their own.
- **Read books about feelings** to normalize them and help talk about them.
- **Listen to music you find healing:** classical, rock music, instrumental.
- **Give hugs and physical affection.** These can be very healing and helpful
- **Engage in physical activities.** Taking walks, bike rides, or playing sports daily helps release some of the physical pain.
- **Help your family member identify people they can talk to about their grief.**
- **Find inspiration in religious texts** or in others who have gone through intense pain. Poetry, song lyrics, and photographs are often rich sources of connection.
- **Take up a new hobby, interest, or activity.** Often novelty can create a space for healing as well as channel some grief energy into something new.

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### Task III

#### Adjusting to the New Environment in Which Your Loved One is Missing and Coping with these Changes

Many areas of your life have changed because this person in your life died. These additional changes are sometimes called secondary losses. Your home and family may feel different, your identity, your daily routines, and how you feel you fit in the world may have changed, and your spiritual beliefs may be questioned or strengthened during this time. You may have financial worries or have to move to a new school or to a new home. You are coping with all the places in which your deceased loved one is now absent and having to adjust to all the ways your life is different.

As a result of these changes, you and your family members are called to learn new roles and ways of living your life. It takes time and patience to make these new adjustments, and often there is resistance. These changes feel so unwanted and unfair! It is often difficult to return to this “new normal” that you are creating.

What adjustments you are making depends on the type of relationship you had with the person who died and how that person was a part of your life. You are helping yourself and your family members explore who the person was in their lives and how their lives are different now without their loved one. These adjustments go on over time, realizing as you grow older the ways the loss has and is affecting your lives.

#### Ways to Help

- **Keep routines as consistent as possible.** Don't create special privileges because you feel bad for your family member. Consistent routines keep aspects of life predictable and secure.
- **Discuss the changes that are being experienced and explore ways that roles can be filled.** For example, they may wonder “who will take me to the doctor?”, “who will help me cook dinner?”, “who will I watch TV with?”, etc. Explore ways to answer these questions.
- **Ensure family members are maintaining interests and activities** that are healthy and appropriate.
- **Reflect on and talk about together what has stayed the same.**
- **Remember that change is a natural part of life** and a “new normal” will emerge.
- **Help your family member prepare for situations with peers.** For example, people may ask where your loved one is or how you will handle special holidays like Christmas, the deceased's birthday, or Mother's/Father's Day.



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## Commemoration and Staying Connected

There are numerous ways for you and your family member to stay connected to your special person. You may choose ways of staying connected from the list below or create your own based on the unique influence the person had on your life or on what was important to them. Read the following list together and see what feels right for your family.

- **Look at family photo albums.** Display photos of your loved one. Share stories about your loved one as you look through the photos, at dinner, at family gatherings, while riding in the car, etc.
- **Share about ways the person's specialness lives on in each of you.**
- **Keep a special object of your loved one's in your pocket or near you.** Touch it throughout the day to be reminded of the connection you share with them.
- **Plant a flower, tree, or garden in memory of your special person.**
- **Embrace the impact your special person had on your life.** Look for the ways they touched the lives of your friends and family members.
- **Make pillows or blankets out of your person's clothes or wear special jewelry.**
- **Have a party on your loved one's birthday** or on special days throughout the year to celebrate their life.
- **Do something your person enjoyed.** Volunteer for a cause about which your loved one was passionate.
- **Make a memory book, collage, or box of all your thoughts and treasures of your loved one.** Family members can add their own treasures, or create their own pages. Cherish the new information you learn about your person!
- **Donate a gift, money, or flower in your special person's name.**
- **Visit the cemetery or place where the person is buried or laid to rest.**
- **Light a candle or luminary in their honor.**

A circular collage featuring a large purple heart outline in the center with the words "We Remember" written inside. The background is filled with numerous smaller heart-shaped cards, each containing handwritten names and messages of remembrance. Some visible names include "Gone Hicken Dad", "Betty Wendel", "Dale Perry", "Stephen", "John", "Mary", "Bill", "Alice", "Kurt", "Love You Always", "Mama", "Papa", "All I Have", "I Love You", "Forever Yours", "Miss", "Mom", "Dad", "Grandma", "Grandpa", "Uncle", "Aunt", "Brother", "Sister", "Friend", "Neighbor", "Teacher", "Coach", "Boss", "Partner", "Child", "Pet", "Plant", "Animal", "Object", "Memory".