



The Four Tasks of Mourning

First Task: To Accept the Reality of the Loss

The first task of mourning is to come face-to-face with the reality that the person is dead and will not return. Part of the acceptance of reality is to come to the belief that reunion is impossible, at least in this life. However, it should be emphasized that after a death, it is very normal to hope for a reunion or to assume that the deceased is not gone. For most people, this illusion is short-lived.

During this first task, some people refuse to believe that the death is real and get stuck in the grieving process. Denial can take several forms; it most often involves the facts of the loss, the meaning of the loss, or the irreversibility of the loss.

By denying the meaning of the loss, the loss can be seen as less significant than it actually is. Sometimes you hear statements like, “we were not close”, or “I don’t miss him”. Some people remove all reminders of the deceased so as not to be reminded of their loss.

Second Task: To Experience the Pain of Grief

Not everyone experiences the same intensity of pain or feels it in the same way, but it is impossible to lose someone to whom you have been deeply attached without experiencing some level of pain. This pain is experienced on emotional, behavioral, and even physical levels. It is necessary to acknowledge and work through this pain or it will manifest itself through some symptoms.

People can get stuck on the second task of grief by not feeling it. They cut off their feelings and deny the pain that is present. Working at this task means indulging the pain – to feel it and know that one day it will pass. Sooner or later the bereaved must face the pain. Experiencing the pain of grief is usually more complex and difficult if put off to sometime long after the actual loss.

Third Task: To Adjust to the Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing

Adjusting to a new environment means different things to different people depending on what the relationship was with the deceased and the various roles the deceased played. The survivor usually is not aware of all the roles played by the deceased until after the loss occurs-companion, parent, sexual partner, repairman, etc. Many survivors resent having to develop new skills and to take on roles themselves that were formerly performed by their partners.

People fail to complete this task by not adapting to the loss. People work against themselves by promoting their own helplessness, by not developing the skills they need to cope, or by withdrawing from the world and not facing up to the environmental requirements.

Fourth Task: To Withdraw Emotional Energy and Reinvest it in Another Relationship

The fourth and final task in the grieving process is to affect an emotional withdrawal from the deceased person so that this energy can be reinvested in another relationship. Much misunderstanding surrounds the accomplishment of this task. Many perceive this as denouncing the memory of the deceased. In some cases, they are frightened by the prospect of reinvesting their emotions in another relationship because it too might end with loss and be taken away from them.

It is difficult to find a phrase that adequately defines the in-completion of task four, but I think the best description would perhaps be “not living”. The fourth task is hindered by holding on to the past attachments rather than going on and forming new ones. Some people find loss so painful that they make a pact with themselves never to love again. For many people, task four is the most difficult one to accomplish. They get stuck at this point in the grieving process and later realize that their life is in some way stopped at the point where the loss occurred.