

Four Phases and Tasks of Grief

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The Four Phases

The stages of grief can be divided into four distinct phases:

Numbness – This is the phase immediately following a loss. The grieving person feels numb, which is a defense mechanism that allows them to survive emotionally.

Searching and Yearning – This can also be referred to as pining and is characterized by the grieving person longing or yearning for the deceased to return. Many emotions are expressed during this time and may include weeping, anger, anxiety, and confusion.

Disorganization and Despair – The grieving person now desired to withdraw and disengage from others and activities they regularly enjoyed. Feelings of pining and yearning become less intense while periods of apathy, meaning an absence of emotion, and despair increase.

Reorganization and Recovery – In this final phase, the grieving person begins to return to a new state of “normal”. Weight loss experienced during intense grieving may be regained, energy levels increase, and an interest to return to activities of enjoyment returns. Grief never ends but thoughts of sadness and despair are diminished while positive memories of the deceased take over.

Because everyone grieves in their own way at their own pace, there is no timeline that these phases are supposed to be completed in. Receiving bereavement counseling and joining bereavement support groups can help the grieving individual move through the phases fluidly.

The Four Tasks

There are specific tasks of mourning that need to be accomplished in order for mourning to be completed. The concept of tasks implies that effort on the part of the individual is required. These tasks are:

Accept the Reality of the Loss – Coming full face with the reality that the person is dead and will not return is the first task that needs to be completed. Without accomplishing this, the grieving person will not be able to continue through the mourning process.

Work Through the Pain – Grief is painful, physically and emotionally. It is important to acknowledge the pain and not suppress it.

Adjust to the New Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing – This may require adjusting to the roles that the deceased once carried out. If it is a spouse that has died, it required the bereaved to accept their new identity as a widow.

Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move On – While the bereaved will never be compelled to totally give up on the relationship, the goal is to find an appropriate place in their emotional lives for the deceased. This requires a letting go of attachments so new relationships can begin to form.