

The Tasks of Grief

Task 1 - Accepting the reality of the loss.

This task involves coming face to face with the reality that the person is dead and will not return. Often the bereaved refuse to face the reality of the loss, and may go through a process of not believing, and pretending that the person is not really dead.

Task 2: To work through the pain of grief.

The process of allowing oneself to feel the pain rather than suppressing the experience is thought to be beneficial in the normal resolution of mourning. In some social contexts the expression of grief may be encouraged, while in others a subtle message may be given that the mourner should stop grieving and get on with life. Hence, the expression of grief may be considered unhealthy and demoralizing, with the proper action of a friend being to distract the mourner from grief. People can hinder the mourning process by avoiding painful thoughts, using thought stopping strategies, or by entertaining only pleasant thoughts of the deceased, idealizing the dead, avoiding reminders of the dead, and using alcohol or drugs to desensitize.

Task 3: To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.

Following the death, the bereaved must take on new roles and adjust to the changed dynamics in his or her environment. Frequently the full extent of what this involves, and what has been lost, is not realized for some time after the loss occurs. Many resent having to develop new skills and cope with the changed situation. In addition, survivors have to cope with their own sense of self, particularly if they have denied their own identity so as to care for others following the death. If attempts to fulfill the roles previously carried out by the deceased fail, a reduction in self-esteem can result. Alternatively, the bereaved may promote their own helplessness by not using or developing the skills they need to cope. In response, the bereaved person may withdraw from the world and not face the requirements of the situation.

Task 4: To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life.

Emotional relocation requires that the bereaved form an ongoing relationship with the memories associated with the deceased, in such a way that they are able to continue with their own lives after the loss. Holding on to the past attachment rather than allowing the evolution of a new relationship with the memories of the deceased can hinder this task.

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