

Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

J. William Worden, PhD, ABPP, is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and holds academic appointments at Harvard Medical School and the Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology in California. He provides a framework of four tasks that help us understand how people journey through grief. Healing happens gradually as griever address these tasks, in no specific order, going back and forth from one to another over time.

01 To accept the reality of the loss, it takes a significant amount of time for the bereaved to make the truest connection to the idea that their loved one has died. It is a connection that must be made in both their head and in their heart. There is a natural response for the bereaved to say things like, "I must be dreaming.", "This can't be real." or "This just isn't happening." Talking about the death is a way that helps the bereaved connect to the reality of the loss.

02 To work through the pain of grief, you must know that grief brings an overwhelming sense of emotions. The trick is for the bereaved to find a safe place to grieve. For some bereaved, that means finding a supportive listener, writing in a journal, or attending a grief support group. A safe place to grieve provides an outlet to experience emotions, to identify the multitude of feelings that are flooding their lives, and to process these feelings in a way that makes sense to work through the grief. This is an ongoing process.

03 To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing takes time. The deceased played a role in the world of the bereaved. They were a companion, a confidant, a lover, a grocery shopper, a mechanic, a husband, a wife or a child. On an emotional level, the deceased is never replaced. On a practical level, the many roles or tasks the deceased played need to be reworked. If in their relationship the deceased always did the grocery shopping, the bereaved may now have to take on that task or place someone else in that role. This is often an adjustment of

circumstance not of choice. As a result, one can only begin to imagine the multitude of emotions a bereaved person is going through as they begin to change their life.

04 To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life, the bereaved must make the decision to move forward in their grief process. Focusing on only the death and remembering only painful memories prevents the bereaved from honoring the life of their loved one. For many bereaved this process takes time, even when someone is confronting their grief. This profound realization occurs when the bereaved begins to truly accept the death of their loved one in a way that enables them to continue to connect with other people and experience joy in the world around them. Moving forward is often done in honor and remembrance of a loved one and the life that they led. Becoming involved in volunteer work, participating in pleasurable life activities, giving one's self permission to make new connections and invest in new relationships are all examples of moving forward without forgetting.