

Tasks of Mourning

The psychotherapist William Worden uses the word **mourning** to describe the active, effortful part of grief or the work. He describes four main tasks of mourning.

1. To accept the reality of the loss

Long after our mind accepts the fact of death, our body and imagination go on living as if death did not occur. We may hear the voice of the person who has died, feel their touch, see them in a familiar chair. We may buy special foods for them, or mentally recite stories to share with them. Each time we fail to find them, we acknowledge a little more deeply the fact that they are gone and the hole that they have left in our lives. This slow, one-day-at-a-time, work of acknowledging their absence is the first task of mourning.

2. To process the pain of grief

Enduring waves of sorrow, explosions of rage, stretches of bleak despair, restless searching, and questioning why are included in the second task of mourning. When a person has been an important part of our lives for many years, the pain of losing them cannot be experienced all at once. Even if our feelings for them were a mixture of love and hate, the years together leave a mark. We may feel the pain of losing not only what we had, but what we never had as well.

3. To adjust to a world without the deceased

In a very real sense, we face a new and unfamiliar world. We need to adjust, just as an immigrant needs to adjust to the language and culture of his new country. We need to develop and get used to new routines, learn to handle new responsibilities, learn to interact with other people in new ways. This process of discovering what this new world is like and learning how to cope with it is the third task of mourning.

4. To find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life

No, we do not want to stop loving the person who has died, or cherishing the memories. Yet, the fourth task of mourning is to find a place for the deceased that will not impair our ability to give and receive love here on earth. We remain connected to our loved one through our recollections and memorializing acts, and are able to simultaneously invest in life. Whether or not, we enter into similar relationships (such as remarrying, or having more children), our task is to discover people, activities, and causes to invest in, to experience love, and to satisfy our need to be loved. Opening up again to loving and being loved is the fourth task of mourning.