The Tasks of Grieving

Much has been written about the grief process. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' well known “five stages” of grief has been a very popular model for what a grieving person can expect to go through (e.g. denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Other writers have given us variations on the process. Just as important are the models of what a griever can do to help get through the process. Different than a process of stages or states, J. William Worden focuses on tasks that we must do to “work through” our grief in a healthy way.¹

Task 1 – To Accept the Reality of the Loss

A very normal response to the death of a loved one is a sense that it has not really happened. Denial is the opposite of this task. It can come in many forms. You may see the deceased in a crowd, or still set the table for them, or you may hold onto the belief that they will return in some way. Worden says that until you can realize that they are gone and that there is no hope for reunion in this life, you will never be able to move out of the acute grief that you feel. This task does not need to be rushed in most cases. But, staying in a state of not accepting can easily lead to life changing complications.

Task 2 – To Work through the Pain of Grief

Grief has so many mixed feelings with such force that we sometimes feel that we will not survive it. We may indeed try to mask the feelings by staying busy or keeping a stiff upper lip. Society asks us to do this because many people around us are not comfortable with the expression of negative feelings. No matter how hard we try and no matter how composed we look to others and even to ourselves, the feelings are there. By not letting them be expressed, we create stress on ourselves that will show itself in some way. Physical complaints such as backaches, stomach pain, chest pain, and so on can easily be caused by unexpressed, pressurized emotions. Even if you are lucky enough to avoid physical symptoms, unexpressed grief may still come back time and time again until you can satisfactorily express it.

Carl Jung said, “Embrace your grief, for there your soul will grow.” As hard as it may be, let those feelings flow out from you. Scream, cry, sob, laugh, tell someone how you feel, and let yourself feel every bit of the grief. Everyone grieves differently. Sometimes you may want to show your emotions and other times withdrawn. It’s important to give yourself and others who are grieving enough

emotional space and grace in their expression and process of grief. To work through our grief, we must be in touch with it, admit that something has happened and is happening to us.

**Task 3 – To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing**

We must recognize all that we have lost beyond simply the presence of our loved one. We have lost the future with them. We have lost the present with them. We have lost that part of ourselves that we gave to them. We have, however, gained that part of them that they gave to us. We still have memories, lessons, and all the intangible gifts that one person gives another. With those gifts, and with all that we are, we can redefine our lives and build upon the past. Even though the future doesn’t hold that person, it holds us. We can choose to grow from our loss and make more of our lives from having known the deceased. Etty Hellisum, in her book *Letters from Westerbrook*, said it beautifully, “…and on the whole, gratitude that he was part of my life will always be greater than my grief at his no longer being here.”

**Task 4 – To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on with Life**

This is often a misunderstood concept. The goal here is neither to forget the deceased nor to dishonor them in any way. One never loses memories of a significant relationship. Rather, this task challenges us to remember that we are social beings and that we have an innate need for contact, support, and love with others. We also have a need to give love. For instance, when we lose someone who is a vital part our life and whom we love, too often we think that by loving someone else, we could discount or dishonor the relationship we had with the deceased. Some people find loss so painful that they make a pact with themselves never to love again. In this task, we are not asked to replace the lost person, but to continue to fulfill our needs.

To continue to live without developing other relationships is to limit our potential to give love and to deny our need to receive love. The love we have for those who have gone is not diminished by the love that we can have for those with whom we develop new relationships. Worden states that the task becomes not to give up your relationship with the deceased, but to continue to love who they were and find “…an appropriate place for the dead in your emotional life – a place that will enable you to go on living effectively in the world.”

The goal is not to reach a point in life where we feel like we are “over it” or finished with our grief for we never forget. Rather, we learn to manage our emotions to move forward in life. Some have talked about that acceptance and moving on with life as having an awareness of having grieved, having an ability to talk about the deceased and recall memories without intense pain, being able to
adapt to new roles, being able to experience gratification again, and returning to social functioning and well being.²

The completion of these tasks will not come about in an ordered and methodical manner. We cannot sit down and decide to complete any task on any given day. We complete them by reaching out to others who will listen to our pain, and who will acknowledge that it is real. We complete these tasks by working on them through remembering, expressing, and emoting. We cannot complete the tasks, and therefore cannot work through our grief by denying, withholding, or distracting ourselves from the grief.

Finally, no one grieves the same. Don’t unfairly compare your stage or progress in grieving to another’s and how well they seem to be doing. We all handle things differently, including grief.

TYPES OF GRIEF

Grief is the normal, proper emotional response to loss. It is unique to the person feeling it and there is no timetable for completing it. It is a process, not an event.

Anticipatory Grief:
The grief that comes before to the potential death or loss. Reactions can be like those seen in after death grief.

Expected Grief:
Loss is expected. People have a chance to get ready for it and make efforts at healing.

Unexpected or Acute Grief:
Loss is unexpected, perhaps sudden. Assault is felt. There is trauma, shock or horror. Without having had time to get ready for it, denial must protect people longer.

Shadow or Anniversary Grief:
Often catches the griever unaware. Grief reactions prompted by:
- holiday
- anniversary of death
- other dates, times and days

Grief over Secondary Losses:
Grief over losses or changes that come from the primary death or loss. This may include:
- financial loss
- moves
- loss of identity
- loss of freedom
- an increase in responsibilities

Complicated Grief:
Grief which doesn't follow the “normal” or expected pattern due to complicating factors which may include:
- lack of support
- isolation trauma
- multiple losses
- loss of long-term relationship
- loss of an infant or child

The griever may not heal in a healthy manner without outside help or intervention.

Disenfranchised Grief:
A form of complicated grief occurring when the loss is not or cannot be recognized, validated, openly acknowledged, publically mourned, or socially supported.

---

DETERMINANTS OF GRIEF

Who the Person was:
- relationship to the deceased

Nature of the Attachment:
- strength and security of the attachment
- how stable was the relationship

Mode of Death: circumstances surrounding the death such as:
- when
- how
- where
- prolonged or sudden death

Historical Antecedents:
- previous losses or history
- other crisis at the same time or close in time

Personality Variables:
- age
- gender
- expressiveness
- coping patterns

Social Variables:
- geographical
- ethnic culture and religious heritage
- support system available

Ibid.
### Emotional Feelings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• Sadness and depression</th>
<th>• Loneliness</th>
<th>• Doubts or questions concerning why the death happened</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Shock and numbness</td>
<td>• Feeling cheated</td>
<td>• Anxiety, fear, disorganization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Denial or disbelief</td>
<td>• Hurt, frustration, explosive emotions, hate, resentment</td>
<td>• Fear of what will happen next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May feel a sense of the death being unreal or that it didn’t actually happen</td>
<td>• Unexpected anger towards others, God, or the deceased</td>
<td>• Relief, freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Forgetfulness, confusion, preoccupation</td>
<td>• Guilt, self-reproach, remorse about things that did happen or didn’t happen in the relationship with the deceased</td>
<td>• Reconciliation, re-establishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emptiness, helplessness, hopelessness</td>
<td>• Haunted by thoughts “if only” things had happened differently</td>
<td>• Sense of presence, picture memories, yearning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• May cry easily or unexpectedly</th>
<th>• May not want to be alone</th>
<th>• Searching and calling out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Mood swings</td>
<td>• Desire to run away or to become very busy in order to avoid the pain of the loss</td>
<td>• Visiting places or treasuring objects belonging to the deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sighing, restless over-activity</td>
<td>• Dreams of the deceased</td>
<td>• May feel like you are going crazy when overwhelmed with intensity of feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social withdrawal, may feel uncomfortable around other people</td>
<td>• Carrying objects which remind the person of the deceased or avoiding reminders of the deceased</td>
<td>• A sense of depersonalization: “I walk down the street and nothing seems real, including myself”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Absent minded behaviors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Physical Feelings**
(Most intense during first 2 weeks after loss)

- Occasional experiences of visual or auditory hallucinations of the loved one who has died
- Weakness and/or tightness in the muscles
- Hollowness in the stomach, intestinal problems
- Fatigue and lack of energy
- General nervousness or periods of nervousness, trembling, panic
- Lack of appetite or excessive appetite
- Heaviness, pressure, or tightness in the chest
- Headaches
- Difficulty or inability to sleep or occasions of prolonged sleep
- Tightness in the throat, breathlessness, feeling short of breath, dry mouth
- Inability to concentrate
- Heaviness, pressure, or tightness in the chest
- Headaches
- Difficulty or inability to sleep or occasions of prolonged sleep
- Tightness in the throat, breathlessness, feeling short of breath, dry mouth
- Inability to concentrate

**Spiritual**

- Looking for meaning in the loss, why.
- Reassessing values and beliefs
- Exploring new dimensions of faith
- Expressing disappointment or anger with God or a Higher Power
- Confusion
Complicated grief refers to grief which doesn't follow the range of what might be thought of as “normal” or expected patterns due to complicating factors. When grief is complicated, the person grieving may not heal in a healthy manner without outside support or intervention. The following signs may show that the person grieving needs professional attention:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signs of Complicated Grief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chronic or severe physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronounced self-blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic school problems; skipping school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightmares or sleep disturbances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal thoughts or plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense attraction to the topic of death, or fixation on the subject of death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

WHAT TO DO FOR PHYSICAL RELIEF and EMOTIONAL HEALING

- Take care of yourself physically by having a check-up with your family doctor.
- In early stages of grief, don’t force yourself to eat more than you want. As your appetite returns, eat a healthy, well balanced diet. Also, be mindful of overeating.
- Get some exercise or even a peaceful, quiet walk.
- It may be helpful to give up caffeine (coffee, soda, tea, junk foods, etc.) as a way to relieve nervousness. Beware of alcohol which is a depressant. Some findings show that alcohol interrupts normal sleep patterns.
- Be gentle with yourself. Although you may often feel overwhelmed, remind yourself that what you are going through is normal.
- Reach out to others. It is important to find friends with whom you can talk to. Sharing with someone who’s “been there” can be especially helpful.
- Tell and re-tell what happened, remembering things about the loved one and the experience of their death. Good memories are also very important.
- Be aware that people grieve in different ways. Don’t measure your progress in handling grief against the way others do it.
- You may or may not cry often, but when you do, realize it’s helpful. Don’t fight the tears as the author Jean G. Jones says, “Cry when you have to – laugh when you can.”
- Confront guilt by realizing you did the best you could.
- Become familiar with the normal experiences of grieving and be willing to engage in your own grief work.
- Remember that grieving takes time, and that experiences and emotions can recur. Be patient with yourself, either consciously or unconsciously, due to unrealistic expectations.
- Other events in your life may also be grief situations (trouble with spouse, children, work, or friends). Realize this happens to many grieving people, and these situations can complicate the grieving process.
- Find support from both inside and outside your family. Don’t expect your family to meet all your needs. Remember that they, too, are dealing with their own grief.
- Many of us have been brought up to be independent. “I’m going to handle this on my own.” We find it difficult to ask for help; yet, we all need support. Take the risk of joining a support group. Asking for help from “caring” people can make a big difference in your grief.
- In may be time to struggle with new life patterns. In the past, you may have handled grief by over-activity. If your previous style of grieving has not been helpful, be willing to try new approaches such as: become active in a support group, find telephone friends, read and learn about grief, develop new coping skills, reach out and help others, and hold onto hope.

---

7 Adapted from “Marin Suicide Prevention and Grief Counseling”, San Anselmo, CA.