

## TASKS OF GRIEF

In the early '80s Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published her book, *On Death and Dying*. In it she introduced the concept of STAGES of grief. Recently, Dr. William Worden, a renowned thanatologist, introduced the concept of the TASKS of grief. I prefer this concept because it eliminates the implication of a sequence of time limits or stages.

The concept of tasks of grief is oriented towards what one must do in order to reconcile the loss. It imposes no time limits or sequence on accomplishing the work of grief. Worden's four tasks are to:

1. Face the reality that your loved one is dead.
2. Allow yourself to experience the pain of grief.
3. Learn to live without your loved one.
4. Find meaning in your life that does not include your loved one.

Let us discuss these tasks separately with our child's death in mind.

**TASK ONE**—Face the reality that your loved one is dead. Certainly, at the time of the death, you know intellectually that h/she is dead, but before you can grieve the loss you must know this at a deep level. It is a common belief that if a loved one died after a long illness, we have already begun to grieve. However, this is only partly true. During a terminal illness we might have begun to let go of our love and do some of the unfinished practical and emotional work. We might also have grieved for other losses, such as the loss of the person he or she was before the illness or the loss a part of ourselves. However, we cannot grieve the loss of our love until h/she dies. On the other hand, when the death is sudden we have no opportunity to prepare in any way.

Initially, regardless of whether the death was sudden or expected, we react with shock and denial. Shock sustains us throughout the funeral and for some time afterwards. Denial allows us to face the full reality slowly.

In either sudden or unexpected death, the full impact that our child is dead and will never be in our life again, takes weeks and sometimes months to hit.

For weeks we expect him to come in the door. . . When the phone rings, we still expect it to be her. For a long time we start to set her place at the table. We continue to do all the things that were an automatic part of life with our child. Protective denial is at work here.

Out of habit we continue certain activities. Only repeated reminders that he isn't going to come in the door, call, or be home for dinner, cause us to stop expecting it to happen. It takes four to six months of knife sharp reminders before we fully realize at a deep level that our love is never going to participate in that activity again.

Unconscious denial that the death really happened, and facing the full reality that it did, are both necessary aspects of grief. But, to successfully accomplish this first task of grief, we should allow the normal ebb and flow between the two.

**TASK TWO**—Allow yourself to experience the pain of grief.

To accomplish this task you must allow yourself to hurt, be angry, feel guilty, talk about your child and how you miss him, cry as much as you need to, ask the question "why" over and over, and express any other emotions you may feel.

Unfortunately, well meaning friends and relatives may tell you to be brave and to get on with your life. In a sense they are saying, "don't grieve". Actually, this advice is harmful. It causes you to bury your emotions and pretend you're "fine", when in reality, you're miserable.

If you really look at it, this advice doesn't even make good sense. When you lose someone you love and who is very close to you—especially your child, —you will hurt. You can't suddenly turn off the love you felt for and from your child and go about the business of living as if h/she never existed. It's impossible.

To accomplish this second task, learn about grief. Read some of the many good books on grief that are available. Find someone who will let you cry and listen as you talk out your thoughts and feelings. Attend a bereaved parent support group.

Allow yourself to feel and express your motions. Rethink what you have been told

about grieving. Remember, feelings aren't facts. Your feelings may not be logical, and certainly, expressing them won't bring your child back, but none-the-less they are there and must be worked through.

**TASK THREE:** Learn to live without your loved one.

Your pattern of living has been drastically altered. Perhaps now you have no children or only two children instead of three. Eating at the table with that empty chair facing you, doing many of the things that your child was part of isn't an easy task, and it can't be done overnight

As you have probably been told many times since your child died, life must go on, but now it GOES on differently than when your child was alive. You must now learn a new way.

Just as grieving is a process, so is accomplishing this task. It involves repeating an activity many times until it becomes familiar.

**TASK FOUR:** Find meaning in your life that does not include your loved one.

Rarely do you think about the meaning of your life before losing your child. As a parent, you didn't set aside time to ponder how your child defined you and how your life was molded by your role of mother or father.

You never consciously examined what your child meant in your world. It just seemed right to go to work, fix meals, save money, decorate your house, or any of the many other things you did as a parent. But, on an unconscious level, beneath your awareness, your child and all the ways she/he was in your life, provided you with most of your reason for living—she or he gave your life meaning.

There are few concrete suggestions for finding new meaning in life because meaning is a deeply personal thing, unique to each of us. We don't "decide" to find new meaning. It just happens as we go about living and loving without our child. Rarely are we conscious of accomplishing this task, but subtle changes give us clues that it might be happening. For example, thoughts about what you will do with your life now, or

that you have two children to put through college instead of three, suggests that you are beginning the search for new meaning. Usually you recognize that your meaning is changing only when you look back and see how different your life is now. You see accomplishment of this fourth task only in retrospect.

As with the other tasks of grief, this task takes time—probably the longest of all the four tasks, with much moving ahead and pulling back. You may be attracted to the idea of change, but at the same time, fear leaving the familiarity of old ways. You may enjoy newly found interests, but at the same time, feel disloyal to your child.

Old meanings are hard to let go of and new meanings are hard to develop, but, if you are to reconcile your loss and find a new life, you must do both.

In summary, keep in mind that these tasks of grief must be tackled over and over. They are sometimes accomplished separately; at other times they are accomplished simultaneously with other tasks. Remember that the concept of the tasks of grief is not meant to be a blue print for grieving, rather guideposts to help you along the road to healthy recovery.

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