

The Second Task of Mourning: To Process the Pain of Grief



The Four Tasks of Mourning are a framework for understanding grief based on the research and practical experience of therapist and psychology professor William Worden, Ph.D., and a key part of Worden's theory is that *grief is work*. It requires the commitment of the person who is grieving, and of those who wish to help, to face the challenges ahead of them. Because Worden emphasizes that there is no single timeline for grief, these tasks require active participation, not just the passage of time. This need for active participation is highlighted in the Second Task-To *Process the Pain of Grief*. The broadness of this task acknowledges that everyone processes their pain and works through their grief differently.

In the wake of a death, it is common to find yourself distracted or even wanting to distract yourself. Some of this distraction comes naturally as there are countless details to tend to after a death. While you may welcome these distractions to have a break from your pain and grief, continually pushing away your grief may make it harder to process your grief in the future.

Suppressing your pain, or any feelings at all, can cause them to weigh on you. You may become both emotionally and physically exhausted. Working through the pain of grief requires you to “externalize” what you’re feeling. Without expression, our emotional pain stays trapped within, only to show up in some other form: the dull ache of ongoing depression, flashes of anger or rage that seem unrelated to the moment, or physical symptoms in the form of headaches, stomach trouble, or other ailments. Here are some suggestions for externalizing your pain and working through your grief.

- **Allow yourself to cry.** Working through your pain is about allowing yourself to grieve, which includes allowing yourself to cry. Parents often feel that they have to “be strong” for their children, but there are ways to support your family and still process your grief. If your children are concerned, tell them that sometimes adults cry, too, and explain to them why you are sad.
- **Set aside daily reflection time.** With all that comes with life after loss, it may seem impossible to find time to acknowledge your grief. Scheduling a quiet, private time once daily to remember your loved one and experience whatever feelings arise may allow you to better process your grief. This may be the only time during the day you are doing nothing else and can really focus on your feelings. Consider meditation and mindfulness exercises as well.
- **Try journaling.** If you’re not yet comfortable sharing your feelings with someone else, try writing them down. You may find that it is easier to write what you feel than to say it out loud. If you are feeling confused, writing down your thoughts, even if they don’t make sense at the time, may help you to better interpret them. Try setting a timer for 5-10 minutes and just write anything that comes to mind until the timer goes off. This may cause thoughts to surface that you wouldn’t otherwise address. Externalizing your feelings through written expression may help you make sense of them.
- **Consider the creative arts as a way of self-expression.** Drawing, coloring, or painting can provide tools to help you identify and express your feelings. Sometimes a picture can capture what is hard to put into words. Repeat some of the activities that have been done in groups at Bo’s Place if you found them helpful. Music, dancing, and songwriting can be therapeutic as well.
- **Exercise.** Grief is a whole body experience: both emotional *and* physical. If you let your emotions weigh you





down physically by being inactive, they may be harder to work through. So, if you're feeling angry, consider kickboxing. If you're feeling stressed, consider yoga. Even just a 20 minute walk outside can help you reduce physical tension and clear your head. And while you're at it, strive for healthy eating and sleeping patterns, too.

- **Acknowledge triggers.** Triggers are an inevitable part of grief. Something, someone, or some place will remind you of the person who died. Processing your grief will help to soften the effects of the triggers. When you feel triggered be kind to yourself and try to embrace both pleasant and unpleasant memories of the deceased. Eventually, seeing something that reminds you of your loved one may be a welcomed rather than a dreaded event.
- **Heal together.** We encourage families to talk through their grief, listen to each other, and cry together. Helping a loved one through their grief means being there for them, even if you just sit with them and don't say anything. Respect that everyone will grieve differently. Surround yourself with supportive people, such as friends and relatives, who can provide a comfortable environment for you to work through your pain. Seeing a therapist can also validate your feelings and help you address the pain. Talk regularly about your grief and your memories with someone you trust.

Here at Bo's Place we like to say, "If it's mentionable, it's manageable." We believe that talking about our emotions gives us the ability to manage them rather than being ruled by them.

Further Reading:

- *25 Things to Do When Grandpa Passes Away, Mom and Dad Get Divorced, or the Dog Dies: Activities to Help Children Heal After a Loss or Change* by Laurie Kanyer
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
- *Guiding Your Child Through Grief* by Mary Ann Emswiler and James P. Emswiler

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- Worden, J. (2008). *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (4th ed.). New York, New York: Springer Publishing.
- Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning. (2013, June 24). Retrieved June 22, 2015, from <http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/wordens-four-tasks-of-mourning/>

