

The Third Task of Mourning:

To Adjust to a World without the Deceased



The Four Tasks of Mourning is a broad framework for understanding and processing the experience of grief after the death of a loved one based on the research and practical experience of therapist and psychology professor William Worden, Ph.D. The way each person works on each task will look different. This is especially true for the Third Task *To Adjust to a World without the Deceased*, because it will be based on the relationship to the deceased. A mother who has lost a young son will adjust differently than a 30-year-old who lost an adult sibling and both differently than a teenager who has lost a parent. The “normal” family life you had before has been fundamentally changed by the death, and adjustments have to be made for your family to establish a “new normal” in the absence of your loved one. To better understand the scope of this task, Worden outlines three separate adjustments: external, internal, and spiritual.

- **External:** External adjustments involve taking on new roles and tasks after the death of a loved one. For example, when a parent dies, the oldest sibling may feel obligated to take over as the father or mother figure. A surviving spouse suddenly is responsible for tasks previously handled by the deceased family member. These adjustments relate to how the family interacts with the outside world, such as who drives carpool and whose name is on the bank account, as well as other day-to-day logistics.
- **Internal:** Internal adjustments refer to changes in your self-image or sense of self. For example, after the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse may struggle because they are no longer defined as part of a couple and are now defined as a widow or widower. It might seem that your “old self” is gone, and self-confidence or self-esteem may temporarily dip. Self-doubt is also common as you may ask yourself, “Can I successfully take over this new role? Can I go on without them?”
- **Spiritual:** Spiritual adjustments are how the death affects your beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world. Life may appear cruel, unjust, or senseless. This may challenge your beliefs about the world or your faith. But adjusting to life without your loved one is also about finding new beliefs and gifts that may result from the death, such as building emotional strength and resilience.

Like all of the tasks of mourning, the Third Task will take time. You may have anticipated all of the big adjustments you will have to make, but there may also be a series of little things that you didn’t realize you’d have to adapt to every day. The person who died may have filled roles you didn’t even think about until suddenly they are no longer present. Here are some ideas that may help ease your adjustments.

- **Be patient with yourself.** Adjustment is not likely to happen quickly. Remember the process will require significant internal, external and spiritual adjustments. Adjusting to the environment in which a loved one is missing can be especially difficult for widows or widowers who may need to learn a wide range of new skills that the deceased spouse used to do, including paying bills, preparing meals, or taking care of the home. Try to be gentle and patient with yourself, just as you would with a friend or a child. Similarly, if you find yourself doing things for the person who died as if they are still alive, know this is perfectly normal, too. Grieving mothers tell stories of subconsciously packing three lunch boxes instead of just two or driving by their deceased child’s school around carpool time. Muscle memory is a powerful thing and often acts independently of our conscious thoughts.
- **Surround yourself with people who care about you.** The biggest adjustment will likely be the physical absence of





the person who died, especially if the person was a part of your immediate family or lived with you. You cannot replace the person who died, but you can help to fill the void in your life by surrounding yourself with friends and relatives.

- **Reach out for help.** Draw energy and support from every available resource. This includes emotionally as well as legally and financially. If it was your spouse who died and legal and financial matters were handled by your spouse, you may feel lost and overwhelmed. Try finding a friend or confidant who can help in the short-term and teach you to handle it yourself over time.
- **Make time for yourself once a week.** Try getting a massage, going to dinner with friends, or walking your favorite path. You may feel like you have less free time to yourself since the death of your loved one, but it is important to still take care of yourself as you adjust to the new family dynamics. We can only take care of others to the extent that we take care of ourselves. Give yourself a break, even if it is just one hour a week, and enjoy yourself.
- **Be prepared for new financial realities.** Your family may need to adjust budgets and spending patterns, especially if the person who died was the primary wage earner. This could mean returning to work or even moving to a new home. If possible, delay any huge financial decisions in the first year after the death, but be aware that this might become inevitable.
- **Prepare for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries.** These days will likely be very emotional, especially in the first year after the death. If you plan ahead of time, it may lessen some of the inherent difficulties of that day. Consider visiting the gravesite, eating at the deceased's favorite restaurant, or watching a favorite movie in honor of your loved one.
- **Establish new family patterns.** Instead of just living with the void in your life, create new traditions; reassign chores, swap seats at the dinner table, try a new restaurant, etc. Adapting to the loss doesn't mean forgetting the past, but it may be healing to actively redefine family roles and traditions.

Adjusting to the environment is something that will happen over time, but there may be ways to ease the adjustments. Be patient with yourself, and with your family members, for everyone will adjust differently and in their own time.

Further Reading:

- *If Nathan Were Here* by Mary Bahr Fritts
- *Grieving Mindfully* by Sameet M. Kumar, Ph.D.
- *What To Do When a Loved One Dies* by Eva Shaw

References:

- Moorey, J. (1995). Living with grief and mourning. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 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/>

