Tasks of Grief

The work of William Worden (in *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 1992) conceptualizes the process of grief as a series of "tasks" that need to be accomplished before mourning is completed. His framework provides a somewhat structured paradigm for organizing the work of grief and healing, which often seem like such amorphous and intangible experiences.

Task One - To Accept the Reality of the Loss

While the initial reaction to the news of a death may be shock and disbelief, these feelings are usually replaced by a dawning recognition of the reality of what has taken place. As difficult as it might be, we are gradually able to acknowledge that the deceased is gone from our lives forever. When there is time to anticipate the loss (e.g., when someone dies from a chronic illness), we may be less likely to get stuck in denial of the reality of the death. Some forms of denial are obvious, like discussing the deceased in present tense or retaining the deceased's possessions. Other forms can be more subtle, like denial that our relationship with the deceased had any meaning. This latter type is an attempt to mitigate the significance of our loss.

When the death has been by suicide, we may also see a denial of that reality, e.g., many schools report the dilemmas caused by parents who refuse to accept the suicide of their child. They insist the death was accidental even though the circumstances suggest otherwise and place the school in the difficult position of not being able to hold honest discussions with students or faculty.

Task Two - To Work through the Pain of Grief

For most of us, the normal feelings of grief are sad, uncomfortable ones. From a variety of life experiences, we are all too familiar with the sadness, anger, hurt, emptiness, and loneliness that accompany loss. A sudden, unexpected death can also carry the pain of regret and unfinished business as well as the guilt that perhaps we could have done something to prevent the death from having happened. Homicides bring with them a great deal of fear and concern about the violence and randomness of life in addition to worries about our own safety. Suicide often burdens survivors with an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the death. Guilt and blame, which frequently take the form of scapegoating as we search for an explanation for the suicide, are often mixed with the initial shock that strikes when learning about the death. Ignoring these feelings does not make them disappear; we simply store them up and are often confronted with them at some future time. Acknowledging and talking about them, however, gives us the opportunity to understand them and put them in perspective. While some of these feelings may resurface from time to time as we are confronted with reminders of the deceased, they do diminish with time. Our ability to work through the feelings of grief can increase our sense of personal mastery over some of the more difficult circumstances we will be faced with in life.

Task Three - To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing

The rearranging, restructuring and redefining that takes place as we begin to identify and fill the roles formerly occupied by the deceased defines this third task. When the deceased played a marginal role in our lives we may find this easy; when he or she seemed to finish every sentence we began and was so much a part of our everyday lives that we feel like we have lost a part of ourselves, accomplishing this task may be more difficult. We may also find it simpler to take care of the concrete tasks that were part of the deceased's contribution to our lives than to fill the emotional roles which can often escape our notice until much later in the grieving process. Learning how to balance the checkbook after the death of a spouse, for example, may be a lot easier than finding someone who makes us smile. This readjustment usually takes place over time as we recognize the implications of the loss and come to terms with all of the gaps, both real and symbolic, that the death has created in our lives.

Task Four - To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on with Life

The resolution of the major work of grieving takes place when the fourth task is completed. In simple language, "emotionally relocating" the deceased means moving from the feelings of loss and longing that accompany our awareness that the deceased is really gone from our lives forever to being able to hold the memory of that person in our hearts. They become a part of our lives in a way that allows us to go on living without them. We tend to be less conscious of the loss, less preoccupied with the deceased. Although there may always be times when sadness catches us off guard and we are reminded of how much this loss has affected us, what has happened is that we have let go of a great deal of the emotional energy we had tied up in the relationship with the deceased and it is now available to be invested elsewhere. Sometimes we invest that energy in other relationships; in other instances we may invest it in something that commemorates the life of the deceased.

As with the other three tasks, completion of this task is also related to the meaning of the deceased in our lives. If we have minimal investment in a relationship, we have little emotion to withdraw, so the process is less complex. If we were extremely invested in the deceased, the loss will have more meaning for us and it will take time to move on.

These tasks outline the work that needs to be done to resolve a loss. Your grief may be "complicated" by the fact that it came from a death by suicide. It may take longer to complete these tasks but it can be done.