

THE TASKS OF GRIEVING

There are, of course, many different theories about, and ways of looking at the process of grief. You may, for example, have heard grief described as a series of five phrases (as written by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross during the late 1960's).

A more current understanding of bereavement (first developed by Dr. J.W. Worden in the early 1980's) identifies grief not as a succession of phases through which a person passes and over which he/she has little or no control, but as a series of four *tasks*, which a person must work hard to complete:

- **Accepting The Reality of The Loss:** After any death, grieving family members and friends usually express disbelief – “I can’t believe this is happening to us,” or “How could my baby be dead? He was fine when I put him down for his nap just 20 minutes before.” SIDS family members often experience strong feelings of wanting their babies back at all costs or wanting to know, or assign, a certain cause to (or blame for) their babies’ death. Having lost an infant to SIDS, your first task, then is to accept that your child has died, that nothing could have prevented the death, and that you will not ever have your baby back.
- **Experiencing the Pain of Grief:** SIDS family members begin feeling the pain of grief from the moment they discover their babies have died, however, the full extent of pain may initially be “numbed” by the shock or disbelief surrounding the death. You may find yourself like many family members who experience their most intense pain (both physical and emotional) after they have accepted their loss and are trying to resume “normal living”. Unfortunately, it is also generally at this time that your family ceases to receive comforting calls and notes from friends, and you are expected to return to your usual productivity at work. Such sudden absence of attention and increased (often unrealistic) expectations from others may lead you to feel isolated and may cause you to suppress your pain. Only by allowing yourself to express and release your pain, however, will you be able to move forward through grief.
- **Adjusting to A Life Without Your Baby:** As the pain of grief is released and begins to subside, you will begin to find ways to accommodate the changes in your life brought on by your baby’s absence. You will begin to weigh the options related to issues such as what to do with your baby’s room or things; or returning to (or taking on new projects at) work; or how to answer the question “How many children do you have?” You will once again turn your full attention to parenting your surviving children, or maybe even start planning to become pregnant. Such adjustments may be difficult because they require that you develop a degree of detachment from your baby. Therefore, it may take some time to make adjustments, and you may struggle with certain issues for a while before you make decisions.
- **Moving On:** As you implement new decisions, you will find yourself enjoying once again the people and activities that brought you pleasure before your baby was born. Your rediscovered sense of contentment, however, may be interspersed with periods of guilt or regret because you fear that, by enjoying yourself, you are *forgetting* the brief presence and devastating loss of your baby. You, not unlike many other SIDS family members, may describe moving on as a process, rather than a decision; a roller coaster ride, as opposed to a stroll. Your completion of the tasks of grief may be indicated by your realization that “There are other people in the world who want and need my love – and loving them does not mean I love my baby any less.”



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