

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Krista St-Germain**

[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 19, Tasks of Mourning.

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, the only podcast that offers a proven process to help you work through your grief to grow, evolve, and create a future you can actually look forward to. Here's your host, certified life coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey, everybody, welcome back to the podcast. I have two words for you right now in this season that we are in; pumpkin and spice. I know that it is now supposedly not cool to like pumpkin spice. My daughter – she's almost 16 actually, that's coming up, holy cow – she tells me that to like pumpkin spice is considered to be basic, which is a word that apparently is an insult. If you're basic, it's just like you're stereotypical, you're so basic.

So I guess I'm basic because I like pumpkin spice. Now, I'm not going to go crazy. I saw a little meme floating around for pumpkin spice Spam. I'm not going there. But I do like fall, and pumpkin spice is a part of fall. So I'm celebrating pumpkin spice. I don't care if it's basic. Join me if you will.

Alright, before we jump into, I know, a really exciting and uplifting topic, the tasks of mourning, I'm going to read a podcast review. This is important to me because as you know, you've heard in past episodes, I want to reach a million widows with this podcast. The statistics I read said there are nearly 12 million of us in the US. I want to reach at least one million and help them, and reviews help broaden the reach of the podcast.

So, this one came from someone who actually kind of did two titles. There's no real name. It says, "Love it so much," as the username and the title is So Real and Practical.

And that person wrote, "Losing a spouse is life-altering. Krista is empathetic, real, and compassionate. She offers practical advice on moving through the process using her experiences." Thank you for taking

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

time to do that, whatever your name is. I appreciate you. I see you and I'm so grateful to have you as a listener.

Okay, so tasks of mourning – now, you have probably heard me talk before and hopefully it wasn't actually news to you, but to bust this whole idea that there are stages of grief, there are no stages of grief. That's just something that came out of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's work on death and dying. So if you are still confused about what stage of grief you are in, I want you to not be confused. Let that go. That work was done to describe the process of dying, specifically from a terminal diagnosis and you do not have to worry about stages of grief or grieving.

So then, you might be wondering, why am I talking about tasks of mourning, and aren't mourning and grieving the same thing? No, they are not. I am going to talk about mourning to describe the process; the process that happens after the loss by which the person who is bereaved comes to terms with the loss, versus grief, which is a person's reaction. Grief is the thoughts, the feelings, the behaviors that are experienced after the loss, and those change over time.

So I think it is very useful to think of mourning, where we go through a process to come to terms with the loss, as something that does have stages, versus grief, which is just thoughts and feelings and behaviors. Grief is with us and grieving are just part of the fabric of our being now, versus mourning is how we come to terms with the loss.

And there are a few different theories around tasks of mourning and the mourning process. And I want to share with you one that resonates with me. There are others, but I'm just going to share one that I have found to be particularly useful, so here we go.

Also, if you're interested in learning more on this, of course, there are so many books on grief and mourning and loss and all of it out there, but one

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

that I found particularly useful, although it really is designed more for a mental health practitioner is called Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy by J. William Worden.

So, if you want more information on what I'm going to cover in this podcast, that might be a great place for you to start. So, before we think about the tasks, I also think it's useful to point out that there are some generalized phases that might be useful to consider.

And so a couple different approaches here that I would offer – one is the concept of phases that was used by Parks Bowlby-Sanders, and some others. And Parks defines four phases of mourning before we even get into the tasks.

So, phase one is the period of numbness. And that's what typically occurs closest to the loss. I don't know if it happened to you, but it definitely happened to me; that period where you kind of go just blank or numb, which can be helpful in that it can help prevent – like, I always think of it this way. If we were faced with the flood of emotion that we would experience if, all at one time, we realized the gravity of the loss, I think it would overtake us. I think it would just consume us.

And so I think this period of numbness, which doesn't happen to everyone, but sometimes does. This phase of numbness can be helpful and it kind of helps us mute or lessen the intensity of the impact, initially, of the loss. Then phase two, according to Parks, is the phase of yearning. And this is when we are just yearning for what was and sometimes can mean that we are not fully yet realizing the permanence of the loss.

Then, phase three is the phase that is called disorganization and despair, where we might find it very difficult to function in the environment that we're in, which makes sense because a lot of us have never been without our person before and we don't know how to function. We have no evidence

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

that we can. We've never done it before and we're now doing things we've never done before, and so we are just struggling to function in our environment.

And then finally, phase four is when the bereaved is entering the phase of reorganized behavior, when we basically begin to get it back together. That's phase four.

Now, again, different researchers describe this in different ways. So this is just one of the ways that I've found to be useful to think about, as opposed to stages of grief, just phases of mourning, phases of the process that we go through in accepting the loss.

Okay, so then, the tasks of mourning – and this is what I find to be the most useful way to think about it because it's so outcome-oriented. A task, I associate it with the phrase to-do. These are the things that we want to accomplish as we come to accept and make peace with the loss.

So the first task – and you can find the details of this, as I mentioned, in the Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy book. But the first task is to accept the reality of the loss. So, I remember, for me, that this actually, interestingly enough, kind of took a little while for me. It was like I intellectually knew that he had died, but somewhere, emotionally, I hadn't quite accepted that it had really happened.

I kept thinking, like, it feels like he's on a trip, like he's on a business trip and he's going to come back and maybe this is just a dream. And I was still going through all of the motions of, you know, planning the service and attending to the paperwork and doing all the things that you do when your spouse dies, but there was still a little part of me that really didn't quite fully accept that it had actually happened. That took a while.

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

Other people experience this in much different ways, when they are not actually accepting the reality of the loss. Some people kind of get stuck here and just refuse to believe that the person actually died.

In another episode, I talked about handling his belongings. This can be an area that indicates that someone has perhaps not yet completed this first task of mourning, acceptance of the loss, in the instance where they are retaining possessions, keeping things, because they believe that the person is going to need them again.

This is different to keeping things because you're not emotionally ready to part with them because you just don't want to yet. But someone who might be holding onto belongings because they have not truly accepted that the person isn't coming back and might need those belongings, that's a different story.

Another way that people can not pass through this task of mourning is when they basically try to deny the meaning of the loss, meaning that they minimize it. They make it seem less significant than it actually is. They try to kind of shelter themselves from the reality of it by minimizing it.

So, "Well, he wasn't a good husband, he wasn't a good dad, I'm glad he died." The things they might say to attempt to not feel the real pain and weight of it. And sometimes people will get rid of things immediately, not because they want to let others get good use out of them, but because they're trying to get away from all of the reminders that the person has actually died by changing their physical environment, and so they just get rid of everything as fast as possible because, in a way, they're denying that it's actually happened.

And then some other people kind of selectively forget and block out the reality of the person; block out how they looked, their memories of them, and genuinely don't seem to recall that person in their life.

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

So I think, what we're looking for in this first task of mourning is an awareness that it's different for different people. It may take some time. It may not be easy to spot when we haven't actually done it.

So it may seem like intellectually we get it, like, that's how I was, intellectually I got it. But something wasn't quite clicking yet emotionally. I hadn't really emotionally accepted it, and that's what we're trying to accomplish with this first task. Coming to that balance where we intellectually accept that the person has died, and we emotionally accept that they aren't going to be alive anymore, and we process that. We come to the realization that the loss is real, both intellectually and emotionally.

Task two is to process the pain of grief. Now, this one is what I find, I think, to be the most interesting for me as a coach. And it interests me on so many levels. One, because so often, people will come to me thinking that they have processed the pain and feeling stuck in a particular area but not knowing why, or they will come to me for something unrelated or that they think is unrelated to grief.

Maybe it's a behavior that they're trying to change, like they're overdrinking or they're overeating or there's some sort of undesirable behavior for them that they want to break through and they don't exactly understand why they're doing it and come to find out they maybe have not processed the pain associated with their grief.

And so when I say pain associated with grief, if there is physical pain, yes, that for sure we want to work through. And sometimes, we really do have physical pain associated with grief. Like, the term heartache is no joke. I need to do an episode on the podcast of physical symptoms of grief, physical response to grief. But that really is a real thing, broken heart syndrome. And sometimes we actually feel physical pain associated with the loss.

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

Now, of course, everyone's experience is different. So if you didn't feel any physical pain, it's not a problem. If you did, it's not a problem. It's all different for all people. The same is true with emotions. But unfortunately, what happens is that because we live in a culture which doesn't really ever teach us how to feel our feelings and nobody's particularly comfortable with death, then number one, we don't really have the skills to feel our feelings. We don't even know it's really a thing. We don't know that we're not feeling our feelings. Go back to episode number three, How to Feel Better Now if you want more help there.

But then also that because we're so uncomfortable with death as a culture, we say some really unhelpful things to people. We offer those platitudes that can often mean that you, as the bereaved, can end up really not helping yourself as it relates to feeling your feelings.

So if somebody's telling you, "Look, you just need to move on," and you're believing it, or, "You just need to be strong for your kids," and so you're stuffing down all of the feelings that you have, or, "You just need to get over it. You could have another husband. You're young." Any of these things that you might internalize and adopt as your own or just try to get used to and conform to might prevent you from actually processing the emotions that are a normal part of grief.

So often, I see too that we're hesitant to feel our feelings if we have the belief that it's like a black hole, a vortex that we'll never come out of. If you've never been taught this skill of allowing a feeling, then it makes sense why you might think that it's an undesirable thing to do, that maybe you'll get stuck there, that if you allow it, the floodgates will open and you'll never come out of it, which isn't true, I promise.

It's just not true. But thoughts like that, the lack of skill, the lack of knowledge, prevents us sometimes from actually processing the pain. And then, also sometimes, we're so hell-bent on not feeling it, or maybe it

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

wasn't even a decision we made on purpose to not feel it, but we think that we can get away from it. We think that, you know, I'll just move, I'll just change houses. I'll just move cities. I'll just jump into the next relationship.

And we attempt to kind of minimize the emotional component by changing something, which can be very frustrating when you realize that you can make all of the external changes, but without feeling the feelings and processing what's happened, it usually isn't a solution that works. You can avoid feelings, but mostly, they will wait. They will wait. And changing things externally won't necessarily make you feel better in the long-term, it just might be a short-term Band-Aid.

So we actually have to learn how to process all of the feelings, all of the pain that is associated with grief. And that can include different emotions for different people, but for sure, guilt, anger, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, very common. We have to understand how to do that. So if you get stuck there, reach out to me. That's one of the things I specialize in.

Task number three, we have to figure out how to adjust without our person. We have to figure out how to adjust. And this can mean a lot of different things. This can mean we have to figure out how to parent. We've never parented without him. Even if your kids are grown – I don't care if your kids are little or your kids are grown, there are going to be things that you have never done before in this way without your person.

You may not know how to go to a restaurant without your person. There are so many different things and it's unique to every situation, and many times, we don't even know what all the roles were that that person was playing until they're gone. And hello, now we've got to figure it out.

So sometimes, that means new skills, new roles. We talked about confidence in another episode. Things we have never done before, maybe it's the finances, maybe it's taking care of the home maintenance. Maybe

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

you were a stay at home mom, you've never worked outside the home. Maybe you have to figure out how to go earn enough money to keep things going.

There are actual concrete skills that we have to learn so that we can adjust to the world without our person. And some of those things are just what I would consider the more external things. We also have to adjust to all of the internal things. So where did we get our identity from?

Did we see ourselves as the caregiver? Maybe your husband had a terminal illness. Or maybe he didn't and you still identified as the caregiver. Now what? Who are you now? How do you define yourself? How do you see yourself? Why are you here? That's an adjustment that has to be made. It's possible that our self-confidence, our self-esteem was highly dependent upon him.

We didn't know it, but we've got to figure out now, now what? What if no one ever loves me like he did? What does that mean? Who am I when I'm not in this partnership anymore? Who am I now that all of the dreams I had included him and I've got to reconsider that?

And a loss like this can have a major impact on one of the biggest things that I coach on, which is self-efficacy, which is the degree to which people feel they have control over what happens to them. One of the things that I spend a lot of time helping my clients on is understanding what exists in the world outside of them, where the world stops, and where they start, what they actually can control.

Because so often, we've got it way backwards, trying to control the things we can't control and we don't think we can control things that we actually can. So doing that work is sometimes very necessary because when you fully understand what you can and can't control and you believe in yourself

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

and your ability to maximize what you can control, it's much a more adjusted enjoyable experience.

And then we also have to consider the spiritual aspects, like our sense of meaning. What is this world even about? And a death can just absolutely shake our entire foundation of what we ever thought we knew. It can challenge our fundamental beliefs at their core and make us feel like we have completely lost our direction, like we are un-tethered.

And where we used to think that the world was a benevolent place, that it made sense, maybe it doesn't now. Maybe we have to reconsider that. Maybe we challenge those assumptions and we reevaluate. Now we have to come to our own conclusions, especially if maybe there was violence involved.

You grow up and you think, it's a good world and if I just do good things, if I'm a good person then good things will happen. So what the heck? I've been a good person, so is this it? We've got to come to terms with all of that spiritually. And sometimes that can mean spiritual crisis.

And sometimes, there's no answer for the questions that we ask about what it all means, why it happened. There's no concrete way to get the answers, and so we have to go through that process of really thinking it through and deciding and coming to terms with. And what I want for my clients, what I want for you, even if you're never my client, is that you choose these things on purpose, that you decide on purpose how you want to see this world that you live in.

You decide on purpose how you want to see yourself. You realize what it is that you can and can't control and that you become okay with knowing that you may never really know the absolute why and that you are able to adjust to that in a way that serves what you want to create with your life. So that's task three.

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

Task four is to find a way to remember the deceased in the midst of embarking on the rest of one's journey through life. So that means remember and move forward. We're never going to forget the person, right? The goal is to figure out how to remember and move forward.

That doesn't mean that we can no longer have a relationship with the deceased, with our person, with our husband, with our spouse. In fact, we'll always have a relationship because relationships are just comprised of thoughts and feelings and we'll always have thoughts and feelings. So figuring out how to find a way to remember and move forward means that we get to figure out what is the appropriate place, the desired place for our husband in our emotional lives so that we can go on and live effectively.

I wanted to read this actually straight from the book because I thought it was good. So, "At first, a widow cannot separate her purposes and understanding from the husband who figured so centrally in them. She has to revive the relationship, to continue it by symbols and make believe in order to feel alive. But as time goes by, she begins to reformulate life in terms which assimilate the fact of his death. She makes a gradual transformation from talking to him as if sitting in the armchair beside me, to thinking what he would have said and done, and from there, to planning her own and her children's future in terms of what he would have wished, until finally, the wishes become her own and she no longer consciously refers them to him."

Now, I'm not fully there, and I think that's okay. I still wonder what he would have wished and I don't think that his wishes have necessarily become mine, and I think that's okay because, frankly, we didn't share all of the same wishes. I don't need all of his wishes to become mine. I just need to have my own wishes. So I don't think that all of his wishes have to become yours, but I like the process, the transition that is illustrated in that quote.

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

So, how do you know if you're stuck here? How do you know if you haven't quite moved through this phase? What I see is often women who might be living, like surviving, but they aren't really thriving. They're just going through the motions. It's very hollow and stuck in the past.

And sometimes, they will even articulate that that is their intention. I highly doubt – this is my guess – that you're listening to the podcast if you have decided that you're not going to live or love again. Maybe you are, I don't know, I could be wrong. But I do see that a lot. It fascinates me. I see it a lot actually on Facebook with people who aren't my clients but who respond to things that I post and will say, "I've decided I'm never going to love again. I've decided I'm not going to live again. When he died, I died with him." And they seem very attached to that way of thinking.

Clearly, they have not figured out how to remember him and live. Now, is that what everyone needs to do? That's not my place to decide. But I can say for sure that it is your option. And this might be the most difficult task to accomplish because we might not even know that we're stuck. We might not even know that we aren't going forward, we really aren't choosing a life on purpose, that we are continuing to define ourselves based on our past and we aren't choosing new dreams, we aren't choosing new experiences, we aren't choosing forward movement.

So, I hope these tasks give you a new way to think about what it is that we set out to accomplish, what is desirable to accomplish as a person who is bereaved as we come to terms with the loss. And if there is somewhere that you are stuck, for sure, you can reach out to me. This is what I love to help people with.

I love to help my clients – when people come to me and they know they want more, they know that more is possible but they just need a little oomph, they need a little understanding, they need a little perspective, they need to understand why they're stuck, why they're holding themselves

## Ep #19: Tasks of Mourning

back. They need some tools. They need to know how to believe new things, how to get comfortable with feelings, how to dream again, how to create your purpose again, how to start living, how to get back fully in the game so that they love life. That's everything to me.

So, I mentioned it, I know, in last week's podcast, but my new group coaching program has started. So if you are interested, if you want to be one of the few people – I keep this group small. I want this group to be small because I just think it can help people. When it's not a gigantic group, it can help people a little bit better. It can be more personal. Everyone gets to know each other a little bit better and in six months, transformation time. So, super fun.

I hope you have an amazing week. I hope this podcast was useful to you. Remember, I love you, you've got this, and I will see you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

Ready to start building a future you can actually look forward to? Get a free copy of Krista's Love Your Life Again Game Plan, and learn her three-step process so you can stop feeling stuck and start creating your next great chapter. No matter what you've been through, your past does not have to define what's possible in your future.

Text the word PLAN to 1-858-widows-1, or visit [coachingwithkrista.com/plan](http://coachingwithkrista.com/plan) and get Krista's Love Your Life Again Game Plan delivered straight to your inbox. A future you love is still possible and you are worth it. Text the word PLAN to 1-858-widows-1, or visit [coachingwithkrista.com/plan](http://coachingwithkrista.com/plan) and get your free game plan today.