

# Seven Spiritual Tasks of the Grieving Process, and the Importance of Spiritual Work in Grief

## Sete Tarefas Espirituais e a Importância do Trabalho Espiritual no Luto

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Our objective was to conduct a survey on the acceptance of seven spiritual tasks of grieving by volunteers who are mentoring the process of grief recovery.

**Methodology:** An online questionnaire to survey opinions was prepared and sent to the population of the database of a social health centre in Madrid (Spain). Responses to the questionnaire were received from 766 volunteers. The questionnaire collected data on time and experience of work or learning in grief, including the following specific topics: companionship, experience, training, and background in grief. As well as opinions on the importance of spiritual work in grief (from 1 to 10). In addition, seven spiritual tasks of grieving were listed together with the request for evaluation.

**Results:** The importance of spiritual work in grief was evaluated 8.8 out of 10. All the other tasks including remembering grief in a healthy way, thanking and forgiving, celebrating and ritualizing, praying the grieving, welcoming and accepting the inheritance and the legacy in a healthy way, cultivating hope in grief, and projecting oneself creatively and in solidarity with the future, were valued above 7.5 out of 10. This was in regard to the importance of their specific work in the grieving process, and in addition they were evaluated 7.4 out of 10 in terms of belonging to the spiritual domain.

**Conclusion:** In this increasingly individualized world, where the current models reveal deficiencies, this paper highlights the need of continuing the investigation and the inclusion of the spiritual tasks in grieving work.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Psychological; Counseling; Grief; Spirituality

### Resumo

**Introdução:** O nosso objetivo foi realizar um levantamento sobre a aceitação das sete tarefas espirituais do luto por voluntários no seu acompanhamento.

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**Metodologia:** Foi elaborado um questionário para pesquisa de opinião para ser respondido *online* e ser enviado para a base de dados de um centro de saúde e social em Madrid (Espanha). O questionário foi respondido por 766 pessoas. Foi pesquisado o tempo e a experiência de trabalho e/ou aprendizagens no luto através dos seguintes tópicos: acompanhamento, experiência, formação e conhecimento sobre o luto. Pesquisada também a importância do trabalho espiritual no luto (de 1 a 10). De seguida, foram descritas as sete tarefas espirituais do luto solicitando-se a sua avaliação.

**Resultados:** A importância do trabalho espiritual no luto foi avaliada em 8,8 de 10. As tarefas: *lembrando o luto de forma saudável; obrigado e perdoe; celebre e ritualize, Reze o luto; para acolher e aceitar a herança e o legado de forma saudável; cultivar esperança no luto e projetar-se criativamente e em solidariedade ao future*, foram pontuadas acima de 7,5 em 10. Relativamente à importância do seu trabalho específico no processo de luto em termos do domínio espiritual, a pontuação foi de 7,4 em 10.

**Conclusão:** Neste mundo em processo crescente de individualidades e onde os modelos atuais de luto revelam deficiência, o presente artigo destaca a necessidade de continuar a investigação e a inclusão das tarefas espirituais no processo do luto.

**Palavras-chave:** Aconselhamento; Adaptação Psicológica; Espiritualidade; Luto

## Introduction

Pain in grief is transversal because it encompasses all dimensions of the human being: physical, mental, emotional, relational, spiritual and values. The bereaved frequently suffer loneliness and has tendency to close in on oneself. In fact, we observe in our experience of accompanying grief that many people reach out to their religious faith and/or their hopes,<sup>1</sup> in a transcendent or spiritual search.

Within the psychology of religion and spirituality, the concept of “religious coping” argues for the importance of one’s belief system in orienting oneself in the world, especially in the face of stressful events.<sup>2</sup>

There is broad consensus on the health-giving effects of religion and spirituality on grief.<sup>3</sup> However, “Available data does not allow for a definite answer on whether religious/spiritual beliefs effectively influence grief as most studies suffer from weaknesses in design and methodological flaws. Further research is needed”<sup>4</sup>

According to our Humanising model of grief intervention<sup>5</sup> and supported by Worden’s four tasks of grief,<sup>6</sup> we have observed that there are tasks related to spirituality, whose work in the process helps the bereaved. We should point out that in Worden’s third task, one of the necessary adaptations to be carried out is the spiritual one, which involves taking on roles and goals in life that one did not have before.

We propose seven spiritual tasks: Two tasks are related to the past: the task of remembering, as well as that of thanking and forgiving. Three tasks are linked to the present: celebrate and ritualize, that signify suffering and relate to God, and welcome

and accept healthy legacy and inheritance. Two other tasks are related to the future: cultivate hope, and project yourself creatively and in solidarity.

These above seven tasks are explained below:

### (Task 1) Remembering the grief in a healthy way

This involves healing the attachment and the bond.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, certain ways of remembering may not be healthy grief work, but rather unhealthy rumination.<sup>8</sup> However, remembering can be a way of resuscitating, reviving and/or reactivating hope.<sup>9</sup>

### (Task 2) Thank and forgive

Being grateful is an act that expresses a positive psychological state. It involves connecting with oneself, with others, with God and/or with the transpersonal, so it is an experience of spiritual depth and a way of giving meaning to the past. On the other hand, forgiving is a mental, affective, and attitudinal exercise. Forgiveness involves accepting, forgiving yourself as well, and letting go of internal conflict.<sup>10</sup>

### (Task 3) Celebrate and ritualize

Celebrating what we experience and having individual and communal rituals is common to all cultures and times.<sup>11</sup> It is a privileged way of differentiating ordinary moments from special ones, bringing the sacred or spiritual into the profane and expressing the individual’s belonging to the community.<sup>12,13</sup> Something that, specifically in grieving, is extremely necessary.<sup>14,15</sup>

#### **(Task 4) Give meaning to suffering and feeling intimacy with God; praying the mourning**

Religions do not show a parallel path or a magical solution to integrate grief and the process grief adequately, but all of them offer the relationship with God as a psycho-spiritual link that helps the bereaved to re-signify his or her life from love.<sup>16,17</sup> Prayer, and specifically petition, is the most classic way of expressing this.

#### **(Task 5) To welcome and accept the inheritance and the legacy in a healthy way**

This is the ability to cope with what the process of inheritance entails, not only materially, but also emotionally, relationally and in terms of the values for which the loved one fought.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, it may involve receiving assets or debts, moments of reconciliation or conflict, comparisons between heirs, etc... And something that in principle should not hinder the grieving process can become very painful.<sup>19-21</sup> No less important is the so-called "emotional legacy" as a farewell prior to death.<sup>22</sup>

#### **(Task 6) Cultivate hope in grief**

Hope is an essential anthropological dynamism, a form of care and openness to the future that favours the progress of grief, opening the bereaved to a stage of growth and transformation.<sup>23</sup> Spirituality is one of the greatest generators of hope,<sup>19</sup> a source of meaning and training for self-transcendence.<sup>24-26</sup>

#### **(Task 7) Projecting oneself creatively and in solidarity in the future**

When it seems that one's own personal world has died with the deceased, contact, relationships with others, closeness, everything that helps to get out of oneself is essential to heal the grieving.<sup>23</sup> One of the ways is to let oneself be cared for, to let oneself be consoled, to give oneself permission to feel bad in such a way that it does not victimise us but rather launches us to transcend ourselves. For example, through creativity, art, nature and everything that can open us to beauty.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, many authors perceive grief as a creative process.<sup>27-29</sup> Continuing the theme of "grief tasks", we propose to complement the Humanising Model of Grief Intervention by including these seven tasks of a spiritual nature, oriented both to the past, present and future of the bereaved. The aim of these tasks is to carry out a spiritual journey from grief that has complementary implications to current work models where the spiritual and value-based aspects are often neglected.<sup>24</sup>

As part of this project, the specific objective of this study was to conduct a survey on how experts in grief work were open

to incorporate these spiritual tasks. To this end, we carried out an opinion survey requesting two types of assessment, on one hand regarding the importance of each one for the elaboration of grief and on the other hand, regarding the belonging of each one of these tasks to the sphere of the person's spirituality.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

A deductive content survey was prepared and sent to the database of our centre and answered online. The questionnaires were sent by e-mail to 1548 persons and 766 returned it during the next four weeks. The questionnaire goes through the seven spirituals task of grief to understand comprehensively the events in terms of the volunteer's experiences and perceptions on the importance of spiritual work in the grieving process.

### **Variables and instrument of data collection**

The sociodemographic characteristics are age and gender. Time and experience of work and/or learning in grief (companion, experience, training, ignorance of grief) and opinion on the importance of spiritual work in grief were also collected.

Also, the seven spiritual tasks of grieving were listed together with the request for evaluation (from 1 to 10) in terms of their importance for the elaboration of grieving and in terms of belonging to the spiritual domain.

### **Statistical analysis**

A descriptive analysis of the variables of the study was performed, calculating the bias of each spiritual task comparing the different groups: accompanying of people under a mourning process, mourning itself, with study and knowledges on grief (Table 1). The ANOVA test of a factor was done to contrast the different profiles of experience and the knowledge in grief, and there were no significant differences. A  $p$ -value  $<0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study received the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Centre where the study was performed. All participants included consented their participation in this study.

## **Results**

With a respond level of 49.4% (788 of 1548), 588 were women (77%) and 176 were men (23%). Two people did not select

the gender section. The average age was 52 years, with a minimum of age 21 years, and maximum of age 84 years.

Regarding the experience of working in grief (Table 2), 90.6% of the sample (694 people) selected the option "I do not know about the grief", while 9.4% had experience of some kind (companion, own grief work, studies and/or knowledge) with an average of 10.7 years.

In this sample, the importance of spiritual work in grief was 8.8 out of 10. There were no significant differences between groups ( $p > 0.05$ ).

All tasks were valued by all profiles above 7.5 out of 10, regarding the importance of their specific work in the grieving process. Also, spiritual domain was valued 7.4 out of 10.

Only statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) were found between groups on tasks 1 and task 2 (Table 1):

- Task 1 - Remembering the past healthily was assessed regarding its belonging to the spiritual domain by the group "I do not know about grief" with a higher mean ( $M = 8.3$ ) to that of the group "I am an accompanist" ( $M = 7.4$ ).
- Task 2 - Thank and forgive what happened in the past, was valued regarding its importance for work in grieving by the group "I have studies and/or knowledge" with a higher mean ( $M = 9.8$ ) against the group "I work my own grief" ( $M = 8.7$ ). In addition, the group "I do not know about grief" ( $M = 9.3$ ) is distinguished from "I work my own grief" ( $M = 8.7$ ).

The whole group valued tasks 1 and task 2 (Remembering healthily the past, and be grateful and forgiving what happened in the past) as the most important for grieving elaboration:

- Task 1 mean = 9.0
- Task 2 mean = 9.3

Tasks 2 and task 4 (Be grateful and forgive in relation to the past in grieving and give meaning to suffering and feeling intimacy with God) as the most belonging to the spiritual domain:

- Task 2 mean = 8.7
- Task 4 mean = 8.8

Table 1. Answers to the questionnaire.

Repeated measures ANOVA's						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
T1... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	2023	3	0.674	0.550	0.648
	Within groups	932 086	760	1.226		
	Total	934 109	763			
T1... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	41 412	3	13.804	3.974	0.008
	Within groups	2639 650	760	3.473		
	Total	2681 062	763			
T2... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	12 575	3	4.192	4.080	0.007
	Within groups	780 771	760	1.027		
	Total	793 346	763			
T2... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	7249	3	2.416	1.098	0.349
	Within groups	1672 181	760	2.200		
	Total	1679 429	763			
T3... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	8283	3	2.761	1.394	0.243
	Within groups	1505 560	760	1.981		
	Total	1513 843	763			
T3... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	5304	3	1.768	0.620	0.602
	Within groups	2168 067	760	2.853		
	Total	2173 372	763			
T4... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	20 229	3	6.743	1.611	0.185
	Within groups	3180 205	760	4.184		
	Total	3200 435	763			
T4... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	6027	3	2.009	0.751	0.522
	Within groups	20313 830	760	2.673		
	Total	2037 857	763			
T5... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	3989	3	1.330	0.668	0.572
	Within groups	1513 697	760	1.992		
	Total	1517 686	763			
T5... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	2515	3	0.838	0.217	0.885
	Within groups	2935 499	760	3.862		
	Total	2938 014	763			
T6... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	6687	3	2.229	1.403	0.241
	Within groups	1207 313	760	1.589		
	Total	1214 000	763			
T6... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	15 531	3	5.177	2.105	0.098
	Within groups	1869 510	760	2.460		
	Total	1885 041	763			
T7... in terms of importance of grief work.	Between groups	7882	3	2.627	1.354	0.256
	Within groups	1474 265	760	1.940		
	Total	1482 147	763			
T7... It belongs to spiritual domain.	Between groups	5075	3	1.692	0.471	0.703
	Within groups	2732 025	760	3.595		
	Total	2737 099	763			

df: degrees of freedom; F: F-test average; Sig.: Statistical Significance.

**Table 2.** Work experience and/or knowledge in grief.

Do you have experience of grieving work?	N	%
Yes, I am an accompanist	33	4.3
Yes, I work my own grief	22	2.9
Yes, I have studies and/or knowledge	17	2.2
No, I am not aware about the grief process	694	90.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>766</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Discussion

The objective of this study was to know the acceptance of the seven spiritual tasks by people who know what the grieving process entails. As it can be seen in the results, it seems that there is a broad consensus in the assessment of both the importance of how these tasks must work in the grieving process, and as how they belong to the spiritual domain. In fact, all the proposed tasks obtain scores higher than 7.5 out of 10 points, in terms of importance and 7.4 in terms of belonging.

Supporting these results, we observe that people, both with experience of grief and people who accompany the grief, as well as those who have worked their own griefs and even those who are unaware of grief, consider spiritual work in grief to be of high importance. Average of the set of 8.8 out of 10 points, without significant differences between groups.

Observing one by one the tasks, on the one hand we verify that the scores of all the groups, in addition to being high, are equivalent. It is the group "I don't know about grief", as we might anticipate, the one that obtains the most differences in its valuations. In task 1 regarding the people who accompany the grief and in task 2 regarding those who experience (or have experienced) their own grief.

Regarding the types of tasks, those that obtain the most agreement regarding their importance is those related to the work of the past (tasks 1 and task 2) and in which at the same time there is more disagreement, drawing attention to the high score (almost the maximum, 9.8) granted by the group that answers from their studies and/or knowledge to task 2.

The group that has worked on their own grief gives points to the importance within the grief process of all the proposed tasks, below the rest of the groups. The number 4 is the task with less points (7.5) and the one with more points is task 2 (8.7), that relates with the total sample. All of them with a standard deviation (SD) over 2, meaning, with high homogeneity.

Although, as we have already explained, all the tasks have been valued as belonging to the spiritual domain, task 2 and task 4,

thanksgiving and forgiving in relation to the past in the grieving and signifying the suffering and telling the intimacy to God, and praying the mourning, were valued in this regard 8.7 and 8.8 respectively.

In addition, considering that forgiveness in grief is carried out alone (since the deceased is not present), we can observe the consequences of the change in the paradigm of the meaning of experiencing the spiritual, which also requires a change in grieving model-intervention.

Traditionally religion has always been practiced collectively, so the spiritual dimension has belonged to the community.<sup>30</sup> It seems that, nowadays, spirituality has been more socially restricted to the sphere of intimacy, and therefore of individuality. For this reason, the models of intervention in grieving elaborated from psychology have become somewhat obsolete and limited, since religious experience in community is not so present in society, and therefore they do not have the contribution of the spiritual work.<sup>31</sup>

Among the limitations of the study, we can point out the small sample is obtained from people with different types of experience in grief (own work, accompaniment, and training). These results open us to future lines of research such as the possibility of testing our hypothesis of obsolescence of the intervention models, comparing these results to those that could be obtained from other still collectivist cultures such.<sup>32,33</sup>

## Conclusion

The seven tasks proposed to process grief adequately from a spiritual perspective have received a statistically significant valuation in our sample (even between those that stated they knew nothing about mourning). This valuation is given in two directions: acknowledging them as principal tasks of the spiritual perspective (specially task 2 and task 4) and giving value to its importance in grief (specially task 1 and task 2).

The group that has worked their own grief does not present significant differences with the others, but we observed a trend to evaluate the tasks with lower values. We could deduce that accompanying the mourning or knowing it, raise the awareness of the importance of these spiritual tasks.

Add to a possible excess of individualism as a predominant cultural aspect, reducing the spiritual to the religious can indicate two necessary elements to rethink the traditional models of intervention in grief: integrating the spiritual dimension as one of the tasks, and the need of certain level of socialization, that will help to a better resolution of the mourning, for example, updating rituals that will put together the most intimate experience with the sociocultural links.

This paper highlights the need to continue to research the possible outcomes of including spiritual tasks in the grieving process and work.

## Responsabilidades Éticas

**Conflitos de Interesse:** Os autores declaram a inexistência de conflitos de interesse na realização do presente trabalho.

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**Proteção de Pessoas e Animais:** Os autores declaram que os procedimentos seguidos estavam de acordo com os regulamentos estabelecidos pelos responsáveis da Comissão de Investigação Clínica e Ética e de acordo com a Declaração de Helsínquia revista em 2013 e da Associação Médica Mundial.

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## Declaração de Contribuição

**JCB, MM, VR e CS:** Ideia, desenho, interpretação e aprovação final

**MV e JM:** Desenho, análise, interpretação e aprovação final

**RR:** Revisão, análise, revisão crítica e aprovação final

## Contributorship Statement

**JCB, MM, VR and CS:** Idea, design, interpretation and final approval

**MV and JM:** Design, analysis, interpretation and final approval

**RR:** Review, analysis, critical review and final approval

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