

Anger and Grief

Many who grieve say, “How can I be angry at my beloved for dying?” They know they couldn’t help dying. Aghast or ashamed at the idea of blaming them, these feelings get stuffed down and denied. Nonetheless these feelings exist, whether expressed or not.

Many people do in fact feel angry when someone we love dies. Angry at being abandoned, angry at the extent of the pain, angry that our life is changed, angry that managing grief feels difficult, and angry that the world suddenly feels different—empty, unsafe, or lonely.

Swallowed feelings don’t disappear. Instead, they may become the basis for unresolved grief, depression, anxiety, and even chronic physical symptoms. Allowing your feelings, whatever they may be, is essential to coping with grief.

Our culture is not always comfortable with anger. Yet the feeling of anger itself is natural and not destructive; it’s a feeling like any other. Still, most have not learned to accept anger as a natural part of human experience. People do get angry, and still they are good people. This is just one of many varied and intense emotions in response to losing someone you love.

Intense feelings need to be expressed, not denied. Being able to say out loud, “I am angry,” may be all that it takes to dissipate this intense emotion. Then again, you may need to say, “I am angry” and express aloud all the stories and feelings that follow before the feelings resolve or disappear. To fully release anger, you may need to have some safe physical way to express it, like pounding a pillow, chopping wood, or yelling loudly in the privacy of your bathroom or out in the woods somewhere.

Anger can make a griever feel powerful in the face of experiences like loss, where one naturally feels pretty powerless. Some may prefer to be angry so as not to appear vulnerable, openly tearful, or sad.

You can help someone else who is grieving by listening. Simply saying, “Tell me about your anger,” instead of running away from such emotions can help. You may feel more comfortable hearing anecdotes about the dead person than the intense emotions around loss. However, listening to another’s pain without offering judgments or advice is a rare gift to give.

Remember, anger is a natural part of grief. Suppressing or swallowing feelings delays coping and moving forward. Voicing your feelings, expressing anger and any other emotions, is empowering, strengthening, and helps us cope. Judy Tatelbaum, MSW, is a psychotherapist, professional speaker, educator and author. She is also a frequent contributor to Journeys.

Developed from Journeys with Grief: A Collection of Articles about Love, Life and Loss, edited by Kenneth J. Doka, Ph.D., MDiv., copyright Hospice Foundation of America, 2012

