

SELF CARE NEWSLETTER



Coping with Anger

A normal part of the grief process is being angry. At different points along your grief journey, you may find that you are angry at many people. Some find themselves angry at healthcare professionals, other couples, friends or family members, God or a higher power, and even their spouse who died.

Anger can be useful to us, although for many anger has the reputation of being a “bad feeling” or scary to witness or experience. There is no bad or good to anger, but it will provide you information. It is the choices people make when they are angry that can make it scary. We choose what we do to express the anger. I like to use the quote “Feelings are feelings, but behavior is a choice.”

It is very easy to be angry. It’s one of the easiest feelings to express. Anger will put space between you and others, especially when you are feeling vulnerable and want to protect yourself. People leave you alone when you are angry and therefore you do not need to talk about what is happening. Sometimes people will use anger to create this space or shut down a conversation.

The first task is to ask yourself what about this situation or what about this person (what they did or did not do) is triggering the anger. Anger tells us when a boundary has been crossed or when we need to take action against an injustice. Is your anger telling you that you need to act by setting or reinforcing a boundary, writing a letter or having a conversation addressing your concern? Remember that anger can also be the first step toward forgiveness. Is your anger telling you that you need to have some grace and work toward forgiveness?

If you can’t find a reason for the anger, then it’s time to dig deeper. Anger is one of the emotions that tends to “mask or hide” other emotions. For example, if you are feeling sad and lonely, but it hurts too much to feel those feelings or it’s not what you think you are “supposed to do”, then you may be expressing that feeling as anger. You may not even know that you are “masking or hiding” a feeling beneath your anger. Begin talking about or expressing your anger. If tears, sadness, or other feelings come up, give yourself permission to feel those too. When you give yourself permission to feel what is underneath and express it, it will reduce the intensity of all of the feelings, including the anger.

When you are going through grief, you will hear the same advice over and over again, “you need to allow yourself to feel all of your feelings and express them in order to reduce the intensity of them. In this way, you will heal from your grief.” However, this does not correctly apply to anger. You may have found in the past that as you talk about what is making you angry, you just get more and more angry. It’s like it grows exponentially. Talking about anger does not reduce the intensity of anger. The only times that it helps to talk about the anger is to pinpoint what is making you angry.

You do need to address the anger. Anger is energy in our body that needs to be released. You need to find a physical outlet to “burn off” the anger. The important part is to remember that you need to express your anger in a way that keeps you safe and does not hurt yourself or someone else.

For many, they find exercise to be a great physical outlet for their anger. Run, go for a brisk walk, ride your bike, do push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks. Anything that gets your heart rate pumping and gets your body moving fast---none of this light stroll through the park---intense physical exertion (whatever that would be for your level of fitness).

For some, they need to hit something. Many people take up kickboxing or enjoy punching a punching bag, mattress, or pillow. Others take a foam bat to a tree or chop wood. Throw rocks into a river or lake. Tear up phone books. Throw china (You can use a tarp to catch the shards and gather it up to dispose of it when you’re done. Find china at rummage sales for cheap). Scream into a pillow or in your car. The possibilities are endless. Give some thought about what might be cathartic for you.

Use art to express your anger. This can release the feeling in ways that words fail. Take a crayon and scribble on paper. This is a great way to release some physical energy as well, especially if you are not physically able to do some of the exercises mentioned above. Use the color to express different aspects of your feelings. Don’t show anyone---this is not art that is meant to be judged. It is cathartic art—for your eyes only or for you to dispose of when you are done.

Write a no-send letter. Say everything you would want to say to the focus of your anger without censoring yourself, being polite, or staying within the rules of reality (in other words, say everything you ruminate on in your head, even if you would never say it aloud). Then create a ritual of release---burn the letter, shred it, tear it up in tiny pieces and flush it down the toilet, or dissolve it in water. This will serve as a cathartic way to release the anger. Do not keep the letter and never send it to the target of your anger. You may need to repeat this process many times.

Anger will not completely go away after one time of expressing it, especially if it is long standing or intense anger. You will need to continue to find outlets for your anger. Write down a list of things that you could do to physically release your anger and keep it with you. When you feel really angry, the part of your brain that would normally help you process what to do with these feelings shuts down. You may have heard the phrase “I just see red when I’m angry”. Well this is true, we just get consumed sometimes. At those times, it can be helpful to have a list of outlets to begin practicing to reduce the intensity. Keep going down your list until you feel some relief.

