

Growing Through the Anger of Grief and Loss

By Lou LaGrand

Anger is one of the most common emotions that surfaces when grief and loss have to be confronted. It is a normal human response if you feel abandoned, betrayed, disrespected or undeserving of the experience you are facing. It tells us we have to do something.

If you have been taught early in life that anger is a bad emotion or that only people with little or no self-control show their anger, it is quite likely that you will suppress or stuff this emotion deep inside. By keeping it within and sharing it with no one, you set yourself up to become depressed and may have to deal with the physical effects of another little understood emotion.

What can you do? How can you use your anger?

1. There is nothing wrong with becoming angry when dealing with loss and change. This is critical to understand for your mental health. And like any other emotion, it is wise to get to the bottom of your anger, pinpoint the source, and do every thing to resolve the problem. The key to defusing it is to try to understand why the situation developed. What is behind it all.
2. Resolving anger is in your best interests for a major reason: it takes a devastating toll on every cell in your body as well as your emotional disposition. For every thought and emotion we have the body has a physical counterpart. Your body will take the punishment of anger not only when you first deal with it-but each time you replay the anger-causing scene in your thoughts. That is extremely damaging.
3. Become aware that anger can be hidden or camouflaged in anxiety, sarcasm, jealousy, dependency, depression, withdrawal, fear, and feelings of frustration or abandonment. It is all about your ego. Become aware of whether or not you are repressing anger (consciously stuffing it within) or using it to cover up deeper fears or feelings.
4. Decide what you are specifically angry about. Find someone you trust to tell the specifics to and who will simply listen. Trying to resolve your anger is in your best interests and sharing it is one of the most therapeutic things you can do as you grieve. You are trying to clarify the specifics of your anger with your friend so you can do something about it. Make every effort to determine if you are holding on to your anger as a way to stay connected to the deceased.
5. Consider to what uses you can put your anger. Anger always has a purpose. Is it helping you understand your limits? Your desires? Your sadness? Your real friends? Your need for tolerance? Your deep love for the deceased? Allow anger to play a discovery role in your grief. Is it keeping you from accepting the death of your loved one? Take the time to think about the above questions as you choose to let go of your anger and use it to take advantage of creative ideas and insights.
6. Do something with anger. Staying angry and wanting revenge is resisting inevitable change. Resistance guarantees that anger will continue to persist and be problematical. Allow it to educate you and help cope with your loss. Then let it flow out.

Temporary fixes are to vent: exercise a release, shout, pound a pillow or tear something up. This helps but does not resolve anger. Find ways to channel your feelings into constructive action (perhaps so others might not be subject to what you are going through). You must take action to get at the specific cause and resolve it by obtaining the needed information, confronting the source, and/or forgiving.

7. Forgiveness is what will free you from the emotional and physical energy drain of anger. It is often difficult to muster, but it is the biggest gift you can give to yourself as you forgive the other. You are not condoning by forgiving, nor will it remove your anger immediately; it will take time for your heart to follow your head. However, your act of forgiveness will boost your health in the long run, reduce anxiety, and lift self-esteem.

To recap. Anger takes a deep physiological and emotional toll. Yet, it is a normal emotion when someone is deprived of what is valued. And, it camouflages other emotions. Above all, it tends to isolate a mourner from inner peace and the people who can help the most when grieving.

It takes courage and conviction to see your anger as a useful emotion that can lead you to better self-understanding. But you can choose to grow through your courageous decision to forgive. Keep in mind Gandhi's famous statement: "Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."