

## DO NICE PEOPLE GET ANGRY?

THEY SURE DO!! Angry feelings are a normal and healthy response to the death of a loved one. They are a sign that we have loved very deeply. Emotions such as anger are not right or wrong, they simply are. Anger is a part of us just as love and joy are. Life at times hurts and that hurt generates anger. We often see anger as the enemy, so we continue to deny it and the pressure continues to build. Many of us were inaccurately taught as children that it is not “nice” to be angry, whereas it is best to recognize and express this anger rather than to deny or repress it.

**REPRESSED:** If we don't deal with our anger, if we don't allow ourselves natural responses and outlets, then we accumulate the anger. We may forget about it in our brain but it accumulates in our guts. We slowly fill up like a reservoir. When we reach our capacity, we begin to spill over internally by turning our anger against ourselves as depression, apathy, guilt, withdrawal or low self-esteem. We may turn to excessive alcohol or drug abuse, smoking or eating. Anger may spill outwardly against other targets – our family, friends or coworkers. If we keep our anger inside or just below the surface, we may experience constant tension.

Unexpressed anger does not dissipate. It merely hides until it emerges in another form. Unrecognized anger may be suppressed for years. So much energy is required to keep the lid on. It is very tiring. Anger and hate drain you of energy.

It is important to identify your anger and allow yourself to experience it, because those who bottle up their rage often develop psychosomatic symptoms as well as experience a lack of energy. They have chronic headaches, earaches, eye aches, sinus trouble, acne, arthritis, backaches, ulcers, colitis, constipation, high blood pressure and more.

Anger may be directed at OURSELVES. We are cross at ourselves that we are not handling our grief better or that we somehow were not able to prevent the death. Anger directed at ourselves is dangerous. Anger can be likened to a hurricane. When it is directed at us, it can emotionally rip us to pieces.

It may also be directed at GOD. He can handle our anger. We get angry with people we love and never would wish to hurt. We tell them how we feel. We don't expect them to reject us for our words or to change something which might not be able to be changed. We want them to give us a hearing and to care about how we feel. Our purpose is to develop understanding and to clear the air. When we tell God how we feel, we feel better for His knowing just what we think on an issue. We might as well tell Him, because He knows what we think anyway.

After her sister died, our 14 year old daughter was angry and especially angry at God. She later told me that when she came home from school, she threw things around her room (I didn't notice; it always looked like that). In church she would pray to her sister and not to God. Later she wrote to a friend whose brother died about her angry feelings towards God. She concluded that the serenity prayer helped her so much that she couldn't stay mad at God. She displayed good mental health. She was honest about her anger at God and she did something with her anger.

Our anger may be directed at OTHERS: the ambulance crew, the funeral director, a nurse, another family member or other “intact” families who have not had a loved one die. It is important to recognize such anger. We are not really that angry at them. Often it is displaced anger.

For some people their anger may be directed at the DECEASED. It is understandable that our loved one might receive some of our anger. You may feel as outraged as an abandoned child. You may feel “how could you die and leave me?”. Since that seems unreasonable, the very thought is

suppressed. It is healthy to express such anger but be sure that you are with someone who is understanding and accepting of your need to verbalize the full impact of your anger.

A more difficult type of anger to recognize is the GENERAL just plain being angry. You are not angry at anyone but angry that your loved one has died. You may be angry because you hurt so much.

**SIGNS:** Often our anger registers in our body language; tightening of facial muscles, flushed face, sweaty palms, still body posture, grinding our teeth, piercing stare or scowl. It also may come out as sarcasm, a loud angry voice, insults, throwing things, non-compliance or over compliance. It may be masked by an overly sweet attitude, nagging, nit-picking, whining or sulking.

**TYPES:** People vary in their expression of anger. Some people have a short fuse. Their anger may even become rage. They may carry their anger to dangerous extremes, some even seeking revenge. Others have great patience and are very slow to anger. Some just let their anger smolder. Still others may be someplace in the middle or go from one extreme to another. It may be difficult for some people to even recognize, much less express their anger, while others find it easy to express. It is important to respect these differences.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH ANGER**

It is important to acknowledge the anger and to find ways to deal with it constructively. In the old days, we performed hard physical labor which helped to bleed off stored-up anger. People had to dig ditches, chop wood, beat rugs, etc. Recently, one counselor suggested that using an old fashioned rug beater was worth ten bottles of Valium. Anger is a physical thing. The more physically demanding, the better, because it forces a deeper release of pent-up anger.

- It helps to deal with anger physically – take a walk, the longer and faster the better...go for a bike ride...use an exercise bike...work out at an exercise/aerobic club...scrub floors by hand...wash walls...tear up old magazines.
- Imagine whoever or whatever you're angry at being on the other end of your blows – hang a tire in a tree and hit it with a baseball bat...beat boxes with a broom...hit a bed with a tennis racquet...pound nails...throw rocks into a lake or field.
- Write about your anger...in a journal or even in letters that you tear up.
- Crying releases anger and frustration. Do things which force the tears, such as listening to special music, looking at photos, visiting the cemetery, doing things that remind you of your loved one.
- Talking will help you to understand the specific cause of your anger. You often feel better after getting it out.
- Deep breathing, meditation, even counting up to 100 helps muscles to relax and resolves the physical component of your anger.
- Fantasies are a safe way of handling anger. One idea is to stick pins in a voodoo doll.
- Become aware of the dangers and limitations of "inner directed" anger and "displaced" anger. Be careful of uninhibited expressions of rage. They may make you angrier and do harm, which is self defeating. It is critical to unleash your anger in safe ways. Set limits so that no one is hurt.
- Consider counseling if your anger and/or depression continues.