

# Grief Notes

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## Managing anger in grief by Jane Cornman, Bereavement Coordinator

If you've found yourself overcome by anger while you grieve, you are not alone. It's not one of the first emotions we usually equate with loss, but it's a normal and common experience. Some of the usual causes include the simple fact of not having wanted our loved one to die; unresolved conflict with our dead loved one; knowing or believing that someone caused or contributed to our person's death; resentment over an imbalance in duties related to end-of-life caregiving and settling the estate; disputes over inheritance and sentimental objects; and co-grievors having different grieving styles.

Allowing ourselves to feel our anger can be an important part of healing in grief, but there is an important caveat. We need to be careful about how. Anger can manifest constructively or destructively, and we must take care not to allow it to cause damage we may regret later. Holding it in can damage our emotional and physical health, and lashing out can destroy relationships we value.

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Some constructive ways of dealing with anger include exploring it with a trusted confidant or counselor; expressing our feelings through writing, art, or other creative endeavors; and physical releases such as exercise/sports, screaming in the car, hitting, kicking, or destroying safe objects, or investing in a dammit doll.

Another important way of dealing with anger is to shift our perspective. We can choose to think differently about what makes us mad by trying to see the conflict from the other person's perspective. We can ratchet down our emotions by focusing on the problem instead of the person, addressing their behavior instead of their character. We can choose to let go of our negative feelings towards someone, regardless of whether we reconcile or not.

Shifting our perspective may sound daunting, but there is a secret that can help. Anger is what we call a secondary emotion, which means that there is usually another emotion lurking behind it. The most common ones are fear, sadness and shame. We subconsciously choose anger because it feels more acceptable and empowering than the emotions behind it. Taking some time to gently and honestly explore the feelings behind our anger can get us in touch with the vulnerability and imperfections of being human. This, in turn, can help us to more readily see the vulnerability and imperfections of others, which can shift us into seeing what we have in common. Spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation can help us with these endeavors. Working with a therapist or reaching out to your bereavement coordinator can also be helpful.