

Men and Anger

The expression of anger seems more natural for men than expressing other feelings. When expressing anger, we need to take a stand, to define our ground. This is quite different from the mechanics of sadness, which require a more open and vulnerable stance. It is important to note that men in our culture will sometimes find their other feelings of grief through their anger. Many times in working with men I have found that while a man is expressing anger (and I mean really expressing it...loudly, with movement of the body, etc.), he suddenly will be moved to tears. It is almost as if touching on that profound and deep feeling of anger has brought him in touch with his other feelings. This process is reversed with women. Many times a woman would be in tears, crying and crying. I might ask what her tears are about, and she often would state plainly and many times loudly, "I'm angry!"

The act of a man's consciously dealing with his anger during grief is many times instrumental in his path toward healing. It can also have many other benefits. One obvious plus is that what you are on the outside is in harmony with what you feel on the inside. This is not to be minimized. The denial of chronic feeling states is a dangerous thing and leaves people in perpetual states of needing to live a lie. This living a lie has big effects on our psyche. It cuts us off from the world around us and limits our capacity to relate to others. If we are busy in maintaining a false image, we will not be able to be in the present tense, for we will always be jumping ahead and preparing for the next contingency.

A person's anger during grief can range from being angry with the person who died to being angry with God, and all points in between. My mentor, Father William Wendt, once told me a story about anger and grief. It seems that Bill had been visiting a widow and working with her on her grief. He noticed that many times when he arrived she was driving her car up and down the driveway. One day he asked her what she was doing. She proceeded to tell him that she had a ritual she used in dealing with her grief. She would come home, go to the living room, and get her recently deceased husband's ashes out of the urn on the mantle. She would take a very small amount and place them on the driveway. She then told Bill that, "It helps me to run over the son of a bitch every day." Bill concluded the story by saying, "Now that is good grief."

Bill thought it was "good" grief because it was this woman's way of connecting to and expressing the anger component of her grief.

Releasing Anger through Ritual

Another example comes from an African tribe where the story is told that after a man's son died, he took his bow and arrows deep into the jungle and proceeded to shoot his entire stock of arrows into the air in all directions. This was his ritual for expressing his anger at that moment. Instead of acting it out in an unproductive way, such as picking a fight or becoming negative and sarcastic, he found a meaningful way to release his anger.



I once worked with a man who, after the death of his infant son, bought a cheap set of china, went to the city dump, and proceeded to bust each and every piece of it. This was his way of expressing the same thing that the African man did with his bow and arrows. He found a way to safely express the rage he felt, and he did so privately without involving other people.

Men and the Protective Mode of Grief

Men around the world have developed various means to deal with their anger relating to their grief. Rosenblatt's study of cross-cultural grief points out that it is consistent across different cultures that men will express more anger than women during grief, particularly if it is focused outside the self.

Hostility versus Anger

In an article published in the *New York Times* on December 13, 1990, the authors described an eighteen year study of hostility and its affects on health. The study found that those having a high hostility rate were five times more likely to have an early death than those with a low hostility rating. It has been my experience that those people with a high hostility rate are many times those people who are not dealing with their anger, and due to this, are misdirecting this anger out to various targets that are only tangentially associated with the original feeling. By dealing with one's anger, we can avoid this dilemma of long-term hostility. But hostility is not the only means of misdirecting anger. Anger not channeled consciously can come out in all sorts of ways. The possibilities might include: being silent, being negative and sarcastic, exaggerated upset over a trivial irritation, and getting other people upset (to relieve your own anger). It seems more productive to use bow and arrows or china.



~Written by Tom Golden LCSW - Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing