

ANGER & THE LOSS OF A CHILD

Feelings of anger will be inescapable with the loss of a child. You cannot avoid being angry at some level but identifying the source of the anger will go a long way in helping you unpack and find a healthy expression for it. Your anger may be a below-the-surface, low boil frustration or resentment rarely surfacing but never going away, or it may be an explosive, loud, everyone knows it when I am angry kind of anger. We all express anger differently, but we all experience it.



Anger Turned Inward

Grieving the loss of a child directs the focus of our anger toward ourselves for several reasons. When you understand your primary responsibility as providing and protecting it is a short trip to blaming yourself when you lose a child. You should have known what they were thinking or feeling. You should have read the signs. You should have paid more attention. You should have gone and checked on them. You shouldn't have done that thing during pregnancy. You shouldn't have bought that car. You should have left 15 minutes earlier. The "should's" and "shouldn'ts" can haunt you awake or asleep! The anger pointed at your perceived failure can be harsh and devastating, and result in unhealthy behaviors. Parents angry at themselves will often refuse to care for themselves because the anger makes them feel they don't deserve anything good – after all they failed as a parent. They deserve punishment, not quality self-care. Of course, these conclusions are not true, but they are still felt and are often hard to overcome.

Anger Turned Outward

There is no shortage of external targets for anger following the loss of a child. We might feel anger at a disease, a hospital staff or doctor, the driver of the other car, the friends who got them hooked on the drug, the liquor store on the corner or the bar open until 2:00am, or the bullies on social media whose insensitive attacks drove



our child to take their own life. Anger is one of those emotions that cannot be avoided. It rises in us like smoke from a chimney drawn up and outward. The fire inside is stoked by circumstances usually beyond our control. While we may not be able to control the feeling of anger, we can control what we choose to do with the anger.

I first met Gerald (*not his real name*) when he was in his mid-60's and suffering with stomach ulcers, diabetes, indigestion, and anxiety. If I was to be his Chaplain, his demand was that I would never ask to talk about his family or mention God. I knew immediately where his pain was, and on my next visit asked why he didn't want to talk about God or his family? After what seemed like an eternity Gerald looked at me and asked if I really wanted to go there? I said "Yes," and he proceeded to relay a story about how 30-years earlier when his son was experiencing flu-like symptoms, he administered an over-the-counter medicine that made his son's symptoms worse, and his 9-year-old son died. At the family gathering following the funeral Gerald announced that in his home no one would ever mention God or his son's name ever again.

The Consequences of Anger

Gerald believed in his heart he had killed his son. Despite what family or medical professionals told him at the time, his anger was turned both inward and outward, and caused him to make some very poor decisions that would have a powerful impact on his life for the next three decades. Gerald left his job and became a truck driver so he would not have to face the people whom he believed blamed him for his son's death. He did not deserve to be around people for what he did, so he isolated himself into the cab of a truck and disappeared on the road for months at a time. Had Gerald found a way to trust those caring for his son, had he accepted the love and support of a compassionate family, or sought help from mental health professionals, Gerald might not have found himself with compromised health conditions that would not allow him to live into his 70's. The anger that festered in Gerald for 30-years greatly contributed to his early demise. Anger has consequences.

The Expression and Release of Anger

Think of anger whether pointing inward or outward, as needing to be expressed and released. Stuffing it down inside will not resolve the anger, but only prolong the negative effects. It is important to find ways to get it out. Talk about it with a trusted person, write about it in a journal, voice it through art or music, draw it out through pictures or objects that hold important memories, exercise it out through running or working out, or drive it out with safe and healthy but aggressive rituals that release anger like breaking or punching things. One family experiencing loss wrote with a sharpie marker on a collection of old dishes destined for the trash, all the things they were angry about. Spreading a tarp under the brick wall of their home they donned their eye protection and proceeded to call out the source of their anger written on each dish and then hurled them at the brick wall, smashing them into thousands of pieces. The directed expression and release of emotion was effective!

Finding Forgiveness



A key element of resolving anger is finding within the ability to give grace and forgiveness. This is not something that can be done quickly but is necessary for the dissolution of powerful and destructive emotions of anger. Sometimes it is we who need to be forgiven, and at other times it is someone else. But with anger there is almost always someone or something that needs to be forgiven and let go. Forgiveness is not diminishing value or saying it did not hurt. It is simply choosing not to continue demanding punishment. Release and let it go.

