



VIOLENCE ANGER

**Understanding it, mourning it
and using it to effect change.**

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.



Editor's note: Nearly 50 people were killed in the mass shootings in Buffalo, New York; Uvalde, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Highland Park, Illinois, over the course of seven weeks this summer. Dr. Alan Wolfelt, recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors, has been fielding calls, emails and texts from journalists, colleagues, friends and family.

Can you speak to what people reaching out to you are saying?

What they are experiencing in the aftermath of these deaths is traumatic grief, which is normal grief that has the added component of intense symptoms caused by the violent nature of the incident. Traumatic grief typically includes many heightened emotions, but one of the most pronounced is often anger.

And almost everyone I've heard from is angry about these recent shootings.

Having some involvement with the funeral home and funeral directors who have provided services for the families in Uvalde has put me over the edge. I, too, can no longer tolerate or stay silent in the face of the mass murder of children, teachers, moviegoers, shoppers and those attending worship services.

As we reflect on these realities, let's talk about our anger spurred by violence and how to mourn it.

While anger, rage and blame in grief can feel unpleasant and sometimes even scary, they're normal human emotions. It's important to understand that anger is a form of protest. When we don't like something that's happened, especially if we think it's unfair, we naturally get mad. It's built into our biology.

Children are often our best teachers about grief. Think of toddlers when their favorite toy is yanked out of their hands. The toddler wants the toy; when it's taken, their instinctive reaction is to scream or cry or hit. When something we care about is taken from us, our instinctive reaction may be much the same. We protest by getting angry.

Relatedly, the explosive emotions are rooted in the concept of fairness. Whenever we believe that something "should be" a certain way, we often feel angry if it doesn't turn out that way. Again, our anger is in protest to what we perceive as an injustice. It's

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an emotion based on our expectations and understanding of social norms. If a child is shot and killed, we understandably feel that the death is unfair. Young people should not die. We might rage over this injustice. I have heard a lot of people raging since the Uvalde massacre.

And carrying around such anger can be debilitating...

Explosive emotions such as anger tend to feel active and powerful. When we're angry, we're riled up. We've got righteousness in our corner and we're fixing for a fight. If we act out in anger, we may feel like we're at least "doing something."

Similarly, anger may give us a false sense of control over things that are out of our control. It is often (but not always) directed outward. It focuses on other people and situations and tries to tell them what they should have done, what they should do and how they should be. This is part of the power construct of anger.

You've said that anger exists and accepting it as a normal human emotion is the first step toward mourning it.

Anger is also functional. As a "fight" response to an immediate threat, anger's evolutionary purpose is to spur us to respond aggressively when we need to, in the here and now, in order to save our life or the lives of those we love. In the modern world, we rarely have to fight for our lives, but still, anger can move us to take necessary action. If we use anger to motivate us toward effective problem solving, for example, we're putting the evolutionary utility of anger to good use.

In grief, anger is a bit like the numbness and denial we naturally experience right after a loss. In the early days, numbness and denial protect us from the full

force of what has happened, allowing us to absorb the reality slowly over time. In fact, I often call them the “shock absorbers of grief.” They help us survive.

After traumatic loss, our anger similarly often protects us from our more helpless, painful feelings, such as fear, guilt and sadness. I often call these explosive emotions “survival-oriented protest.”

So, we can honor and thank our anger – for a time. But just as we must work to soften our numbness and denial in grief, we must also work to soften our anger, so that we can fully encounter the necessary pain it has done such a good job of guarding us against.

You’ve also said that while anger can feel powerful, active and even good, it’s not meant to be an

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emotion that our bodies sustain for a long period of time.

Evolutionarily, it’s meant to give us a quick burst of energy. When anger is prolonged, on the other hand, it stresses the body. Studies have shown strong correlations between anger and high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease and weakened immune system. Anger makes people sick; it even kills them.

In the emotional arena, scientists have found that anger is linked to anxiety and depression. Again, while anger is a normal human emotion, feeling angry all the time is not normal. A tendency toward volatile, angry outbursts is also physically, emotionally and socially damaging.

Spiritually, wrestling with anger is largely about wrestling with the big “whys” of human existence. Why do bad things have to happen? Why are we here? In this way, anger and spirituality may naturally go hand-in-hand. But over the long term, ongoing, unrelenting anger can also get in the way of spiritual experiences such as awe, gratitude and joy.

It’s normal to have anger when bad things happen, as you said, but...

Our anger is a natural symptom of our grief, but we shouldn’t live in a constant, ongoing state of anger, however, because it’s bad for our bodies, minds and spirits.

What we can do is mourn our anger. Mourning means taking our inner grief and expressing it outside ourselves. When we cry or talk about happened, we’re

mourning. When we pray or meditate on peace, we’re mourning. When we attend vigils or light candles in memory of the victims, we’re mourning.

Mourning softens our anger. It tempers the biochemical stress reaction in our bodies and helps move us from crisis mode to functional-living mode. It helps us to integrate our grief and continue on.

We can also take the naturally active nature of anger and use it to effect change, a key component of the utility of anger. When we use our normal anger to do something *about* a problem, we are both mourning and helping craft progress. We’re using our anger as fuel to prevent at least some unnecessary future loss and grief.

Those angry about the violence can now use their anger as fuel to create positive change. I encourage everyone to educate themselves about the options and then support those you learn are likely to be most effective. Not only can your advocacy make a difference, but it can also help heal your personal anger.

My hope is that understanding and even embracing your anger over such violence will not only help you mourn and integrate your normal and necessary grief but also help our country find a safer, less violent way forward. ☐

Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America’s leading death educators and grief counselors. He is scheduled to speak in Uvalde, Texas, September 20-21.

His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, and a past recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling’s Death Educator Award.

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