

# ANGER & GRIEF

WHEN A LOVED  
ONE IS KILLED OR  
INJURED BY DRUNK  
DRIVING, ANGER  
AND GRIEF OFTEN  
GO HAND IN HAND

BY MICHELLE PARKER, EDITOR IN CHIEF

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DAVID BROWN IS A THOUGHTFUL, COMPASSIONATE MAN WHOSE SOFT brown eyes and welcoming smile exude warmth and kindness. When he talks to you, you can't help but be drawn in by his low, measured way of speaking or his obvious intelligence. He can articulate thoughts and feelings in such a way that makes you wish he could crawl inside your head to help you interpret all the things that keep you up at night. And he is a man who regards the love of his family with astonishing reverence. In short, David is not someone you would ever think could have thoughts of killing another human being. But he has.

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One day in the fall of 2005, David was at the courthouse awaiting the start of the criminal trial that would decide the punishment for the person who killed his only son, Justin. He was leaning against the wall, watching nearly 100 people milling about the marbled halls just inside the security checkpoint, when a small, wiry 18-year-old kid by the name of Todd Avery\* walked toward him. David knew in an instant who he was—he was the boy who took the life of his beloved Justin. He knew because after Justin was killed, David looked Todd up in Justin's yearbook. The kid standing two feet in front of him was the one he saw in that 2-by-2-inch photo.

Todd looked David straight in the eye. There was no recognition, no fear, not even a vague sense that the 6-foot-2-inch man within arm's reach was the father of the passenger he had killed while driving drunk. Todd turned his back to David and stood waiting.

David looked over at the nearby security guards. He looked at the bathroom door. He looked over at another security guard sitting at the information desk. And he calculated. David calculated how much time he had to grab Todd, drag him into the bathroom and kill him.

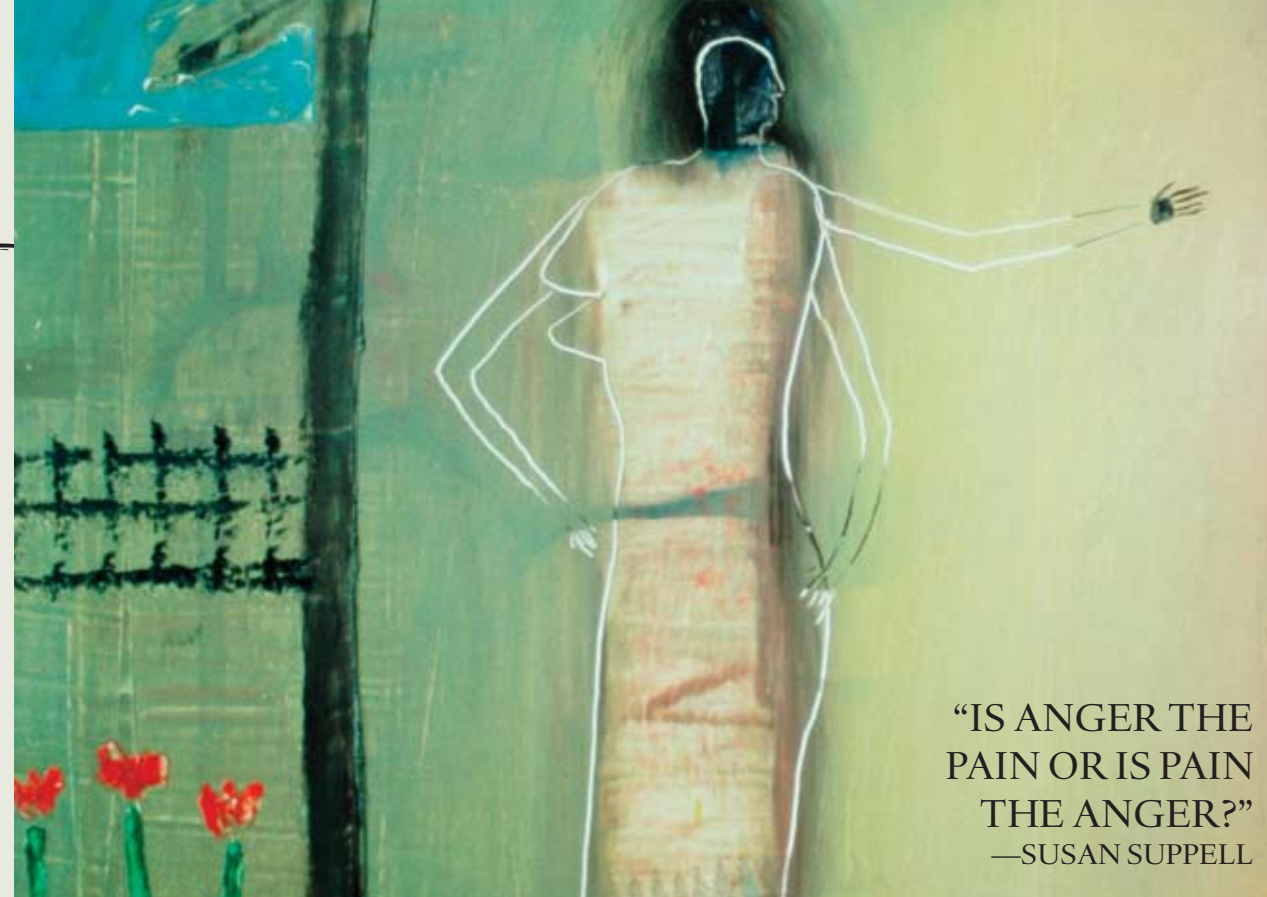
Shocking? Perhaps. Normal? Absolutely.

Many drunk driving victims/survivors have homicidal thoughts, revenge fantasies or carefully calculated confrontations playing out in their head. They also find that their anger, which is so tightly interwoven with grief, is directed not only at the offender, but toward the criminal justice system, their loved one who was killed or injured, and even themselves. Many are surprised by these thoughts and feelings; many are ashamed of them. But what all of them need to know is that what they are experiencing is natural and normal.

#### Anger or Grief?

"I was there the instant Justin was born and I had taken care of him for 18 years," David says of his son. "I was so angry that Todd took my being a father away. My son was dead and I felt bad for myself and my family. But no matter what I did—if I had slaughtered everyone in that courthouse—my son would still be dead. It would not change the reality of my grief."

\*Name has been changed.



**“IS ANGER THE PAIN OR IS PAIN THE ANGER?”**  
—SUSAN SUPPELL

Anger and grief are so inextricably tied that it is difficult for drunk driving victims/survivors to know where one ends and the other begins.

"Is anger the pain or is pain the anger?" asks Susan Suppell, Justin's mother and David's ex-wife. "How do you separate all those things into tiny components?"

"Anger is so often tied with any loss situation—it is just one of the strong emotions we humans have," says Kenneth J. Doka, a professor at the College of New Rochelle and senior consultant to the Hospice Foundation of America. "The root of the word 'bereaved' actually means to have something ripped away from you forcefully. And when there is a death at the hands of another person, it is only natural that we are going to experience a strong sense of anger. Validate that anger, for it is normal, natural and understandable."

#### Emotions vs. Actions

Anger is a powerful emotion, but it's important to remember that it's just that: an emotion.

Many victims/survivors are surprised—even frightened—that they're having homicidal thoughts or revenge fantasies. In particular, they fear that if they are thinking or feeling them, they might act on them.

"Feelings are feelings—they happen," Dr. Doka says. "And it is very common for a victim to have fantasies of violence and revenge—it is one of the ways we work through our intense anger. There is a difference between thinking things and acting things out."

So why didn't David act on his thoughts at the courthouse? "I really don't know, other than it's not the right thing to do," he says. But in continuing, he gets to the core of it. "The scariest part of all of this, the most unbelievable aspect, is that something happened that I could do absolutely nothing about—no matter what I did. No matter what. Throughout the course of Justin's life, I, as his father, would do anything to help him or fix whatever was wrong. Now he is dead and there is nothing I can do to change that fact. Killing Todd wouldn't change anything, nor would it really matter."

Cecile Karp understands what David means. Her 27-year-old daughter, Leslie, was in a 1992 drunk driving crash so horrific it broke every bone in her body and left her brain-dead. As a physician who had just completed her surgery internship at Hartford Hospital and was about to begin practicing as an ENT surgeon, Leslie had once told her mother that if anything were to happen to her, she would not want to be kept alive on machines. Nine days after the crash, Cecile honored her daughter's wishes.

When asked if she had thoughts of killing the man who took her daughter's life, Cecile responds with a deep, knowing laugh. "I guess everyone fantasizes about doing that, but I certainly wasn't going to put myself in a position where I would do anything crazy. I have another daughter, a husband, a career. Acting on any fantasy I may have had wouldn't have changed anything; it would've just made me feel lousy. I can never change what happened. She is gone."

Cecile does confess that she wishes the offender had been killed in the crash. "He couldn't even stand up," she says of eyewitness accounts. "But he was driving a car. He comes out with a little scratch that didn't require stitches, yet he slaughters my child. It should have been him."

It is that same anger and anguish over the senselessness and unfairness of it all that leads Susan to say, "I just wish Todd had never existed."

"It is very unfortunate that any human being has to feel that way," she continues. "But he took my only child. He took the hope of my future. He took the chance that I'll have grandchildren. He took so much away from me that I will never, ever get back."

Thoughts such as these can be jarring and uncomfortable, but David, Susan and Cecile are all experiencing what Dr. Doka says are common, even healthy, responses. The key to keeping them healthy is to look at the intensity and focus of the anger.

"If you are constantly focused on revenge—if that is all you think about—then there is a problem," Dr. Doka cautions. "People who are consumed with rage and violent thoughts really need to speak to a professional to understand how it is affecting their lives and what the next steps are in dealing with it."

"And, it is important to realize that acting on these thoughts is not going to help in the long run," he continues. "You may feel better for a short time, but then you are going to have to face the consequences."

#### Enough Anger to Go Around

Understandably, a victim's anger is often directed at the drunk driver—after all, that is the person who was at fault. So how is it that victims can also be angry at the criminal

justice system, the drunk driver's family, themselves, and even their loved one who was killed or injured? The answers often lie in the complexities and circumstances surrounding the crash.

"We had faith in the [court] system; they were holding the trust of my son," David says. "So when that trust system went haywire, it made us really, really angry."

And it did go haywire.

Shortly after the crash, David and Susan learned that Todd had gotten a DUI six months before killing Justin. They also learned that his license was supposed to have been revoked, but that the court system failed to do so. Then came the trial, which dragged on for a year and a half because of continuances. At one point, Todd's blood evidence was mishandled, nearly prompting a dismissal of the case. And then, of course, there was the reality that Todd would most likely not receive a stiff punishment for killing Justin. Throughout it all,

battle all along the way to see justice done?" she asks with her voice rising in anger.

David says of justice, "We found out that, to the system, killing somebody with a car is really not that big of a deal. Why is it that you can walk into a convenience store, shoot somebody and be put away for a long time, but you get in the car and kill somebody and you may get a couple of years? I have had cell phone service agreements that have lasted longer than that. It is ridiculous."

A lot of Cecile's anger also was directed at the court system. The man who killed Leslie was never sent to jail on a previous armed robbery charge, but instead got probation. Despite repeatedly violating his probation, the courts allowed him to remain free. He also had numerous prior DUIs. Yet, he was again allowed to remain free.

"I was so angry because this person should have been in jail, not out driving. Here was a wonderful student," she says of her daughter,

after his first DUI. They just handed him back the keys to his car. What were they thinking?"

And like so many victims/survivors, Cecile turned her anger on herself. "I was mad at myself, blaming myself. I kept thinking that I should've called Leslie, delayed her by a few minutes."

So, is all this anger justified? According to Dr. Doka it is.

"Certainly you see situations where a person has legitimate anger toward the drunk driver, but they may also have a lot of 'free floating' anger," he says. "It may be at the circumstances, how things are handled and even the victims themselves. Sometimes guilt can cause anger that is directed inward. And sometimes it is a jealous anger: 'How come your son was driving and he walked away and my son was killed?'"

"Again, it is important to validate the anger, to say you have every right to be angry," he continues. "The question is: What are you going to do with that anger?"

#### From Different Perspectives

Grief is a very personal journey that does not come with a roadmap. Gender differences, however, can sometimes serve as guideposts.

In the book *Living with Grief After a Sudden Loss*, Dr. Doka and Terry Martin, Ph.D., address what they term as "feminine" and "masculine" grief patterns.

"Feminine grievors often discuss intense, uncomfortable feelings with family and friends," they write. "Masculine grievors tend to be reluctant to seek help and share their grief."

As anger and grief are so tied together, these gender differences may provide some insights into how men and women deal with anger.

"Sometimes I would scream, just scream," Cecile says. "I also hit the walls a few times. My husband couldn't relate to the way I was acting. Although he was very angry, he was much more composed. He was angry in a different way."

Susan had a similar reaction. "I was screaming, yelling, moaning and crying. Every friend that came to the house had to hold me, comfort me. Rather than talk, David would just be alone with his thoughts. I was much more demonstrative. Men need to know that they can talk about it—and should—to get this anger off their chest."

Drs. Doka and Martin also explain that many masculine grievors experience guilt,

## ANGER MANAGEMENT

Everyone's grief and anger journey is unique. While you will need to find coping strategies that work for you, keep in mind these tips for dealing with anger:

- Tell your story, over and over, to those you trust.
- Write about your feelings in a journal.
- Engage in a physical activity such as an exercise program or team sport to help release feelings of anger.
- Channel the negative into a positive through advocacy work.
- Understand that everyone reacts differently; be sensitive to family members and other loved ones who may be reacting differently than you.
- Identify what triggers your anger and develop a plan for coping with the emotion during those times.
- Know your limits in controlling your anger and never enter into a situation you think may become physically violent.
- Don't allow abusive behavior—verbal or physical—from a loved one or yourself.
- Call MADD to be put in touch with a victim advocate in your area.
- Attend a support group.
- Seek professional counseling, if necessary.

most likely relating to the role of protector. In responding behaviorally to a loss, men often turn to an activity such as work or to one that is intimately related to the loss. They also tend to take legal or physical action or to actively seek solutions to the problems caused by the death.

"As the father, the elder person in my family, I felt I had a responsibility to do something," David says. "We were really action-oriented. We played a very active part in making sure this kid went to jail. We went to court every time because we didn't want anything to slip by us. We wanted to make sure justice was done."

"After every court date, my brothers and I would get together to play music and record some stuff," David continues. "My son was a musician. After he passed away I got into writing more music and playing with other people."



David and Susan had to ceaselessly fight to ensure that any justice was done.

"Going to court was a big deal for us," David says. "We had to take the whole day off work. We'd drive there and wait three or more hours only to have the attorney ask for and be granted another continuance. After about 12 or 13 times of this, we lost respect for the system that was supposed to be helping us."

"It was so painful," Susan says of the continuances. "It just dragged on and on, but we were there every single time—Justin deserved that. And the whole case would've crumbled if we hadn't stayed on top of it every step of the way. Why did we have to

"a Phi Beta Kappa and a physician on her way to work, and this guy just wipes her out in one second—all because the system didn't do its job."

And while Leslie didn't have a choice in her encounter with a drunk driver, Susan feels that Justin did.

"I was angry with Justin for being in the car that night," she says. "He had told other people not to let Todd drive them home. Why did he? He could have called me; I would have picked him up."

But her anger didn't stop there.

"I was livid with Todd's parents," Susan says. "They showed no sense of responsibility



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But these reactions are not exclusive to men. Drs. Doka and Martin say some women are “masculine” grievers.

“I realized very early on that if my family was going to stay together, it was going to be up to me to hold the fort down, to be the strong person,” Cecile explains. “There were going to be meals, I was going to go to work, life was going to go on. I just plunged myself into it all to take my mind off of what had happened and to direct my anger.”

Ultimately, there are no hard and fast rules for how anyone will react—regardless of masculine and feminine grief patterns.

“We don’t want to contribute to the notion of gender stereotypes,” Dr. Doka says. “Anger is not uncommon in either gender, and how each person deals with it is very, very individual.”

### Waves of Anger

In grief, we all have a healing journey. The same holds true for anger.

“People are going to live with grief, and part of living with it is living with the anger that grief may sometimes bring,” Dr. Doka says. “We never get off the grief journey, but as we move through it, we look at it differently at different points in our life. Anger is the same. Every time I think about Sept. 11, for example, anger wells up in me—that is normal.”

Cecile’s anger 15 years after her daughter’s death is a good example. “Now the anger comes up when there is a [drunk driving] case in the news. I get riled up because it is only a repeat of what happened to me,” she says.

But what about those who are relatively new in their healing journey?

“Being angry comes in waves,” David explains. “In fact, one of the strangest things is not feeling it all the time. It is the oddest phenomenon to go through something like this and then make dinner or walk the dog or mow the grass or go to the grocery store—all the things you used to do that were normal now seem strange because you can’t believe you can do them.”

Dr. Doka emphasizes that the crucial questions to ask yourself are how intense, how focused and how disabling is the anger? He says that by answering these questions, people can better assess when they’ve reached a point at which the anger is less intense and they’ve learned to control it more effectively.

“If over time, however, the anger doesn’t dissipate and it’s affecting your relationships, your roles and your life, then it’s important to get counseling to understand the sources of that anger,” Dr. Doka says. “Sometimes we discover that the anger has roots even prior to the crash.”

### Channeling the Anger

So how does one cope with the anger?

“It helps to channel the anger into activities that are going to allow you to express it,” Dr. Doka says. “Whether it’s exercise or advocacy, channeling the anger in useful ways directs the emotion so it doesn’t create a destructive cycle.”

A good first step is reaching out to MADD for support.

“If not for MADD, I probably could not have survived,” Cecile recalls. “Nothing I asked [my victim advocate] or said seemed frivolous or stupid to her. She was very sensitive to my needs. In fact, she is still in my life now.”

David and Susan had a similar experience.

“MADD was there for us every step of the way,” Susan says. “I couldn’t have done it without their support.”

David further explains, “Emotionally, MADD was really able to help us by the simple fact that they were there for us—they were absolutely instrumental. At times like that, you need to have someone guide you because you are so wrapped up in the past and in that second. Your mind rocks back to when your child was growing up—the flashes and plethora of memories—so that you can’t think about the future. MADD helped to clarify things.”

Cecile, Susan and David are all on their individual grief—and anger—journeys. And along the way, they have experienced very normal and natural responses. So what do those who know all too well about that anger—that journey—think of where they are on their paths?

“My anger is now strongest when I’m empathizing with other victims,” Cecile says.

Susan says, “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in anger. Somehow I am going to celebrate the life of my son—he will be duly recognized.”

As for the journey of the man who once had murderous thoughts, David simply says, “I love my son more than I hate the person who killed him.” ■