

Illness and Anger: 3 Steps to Avoid the Spiritual Pitfalls

Written by admin

Sunday, 25 September 2011 05:08 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 October 2011 11:55

By Lisa Copen

"When I was first diagnosed with fibromyalgia, I actually felt relief," shares Cindy. "I had been trying to find a reason for my pain and it finally was acknowledged as being something physical not mental." Cindy goes on to explain, "It wasn't until months later that I started getting short-tempered and frustrated and I realized that I was angry about the diagnosis. I was angry that I had to suffer and no one understood."

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a doctor in Switzerland, wrote a life-changing book called, "On Death and Dying" which describes the cycle of emotional stages that is often referred to as the grief cycle. Anger is the third stage, following the shock stage and the denial stage.

When we are diagnosed with an illness, feeling anger is the most natural reaction. Realizing our dreams may be out of our control now that our body is redefining what is "normal" for us, can be devastating.

Recognizing these feelings and dealing with them is part of the mourning process. We all need to go through this process, and it comes at different times for each individual and at different levels at each stage of the illness. Ironically, the first year of diagnosis may even be easier than the third year.

Cheryl, who lives with diabetes, shares, "For the longest time the disease was just an annoyance, but once I had to start checking my blood sugar ten times a day and watching every bite I ate, I got angry. I lashed out at everyone, even my husband and daughter. I was so jealous they could eat whatever they wanted and didn't even appreciate it."

One thing is definite: anger will come. For some people it will be a mild irritation with everything in life, and for others a flaring temper that doesn't seem subside.

"It is my observation," says Linda Noble Topf, author of "You are Not Your Illness," "that the absence of anger in the face of a serious illness suggests that we have already withdrawn from life, that we have relinquished our passion for living, that we are resigned and emotionally numb."

Anger can be seen as something shameful to express, especially if you are a Christian, who has been told that angry emotions are not excused or even "allowed." You may experience some of these feelings:

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- If I truly have faith in God and trust that He knows best, than I shouldn't get angry about my circumstances. Doesn't anger signify a lack of faith?
- If I reveal to other Christians that I am angry about my situation, won't they think I am weak in my walk with God?
- I know it says, "wise men shouldn't anger" in the Bible. How can I, in good faith, express the emotions that I am feeling?
- I understand anger can lead to bitterness. So if I don't admit I am angry, will I be a better Christian, focusing on just the positive stuff in life?

All of these thoughts are normal, but that doesn't mean they're correct. By burying our anger and not acknowledging it, we prevent ourselves from moving on to the next phase in the grief cycle, learning how to effectively manage our emotions and our chronic illness.

Here are a few tips to guide you in dealing with anger.

1. Are you feeling angry? Acknowledge this emotion and then move on with life.

If you insist on ignoring your emotions, believing that in the end you will be a spiritually healthier person for it, you are wrong. Topf advises, "Think of anger as a resource that you can learn to harness and refine for your own benefit." If you can learn to recognize your anger, it will help you reclaim your authentic identity. Faking it won't take you through this.

The Bible tells us that Job got extremely angry, even cursing the day he was born. After much loss of loved ones, possessions, and finally his health, he had a justifiable reason to be mad at God. He said, "Do I have any power to help myself, now that success has been driven from me?" (Job 6:13). Later in Job's life, however, God restored his life and blessed him exponentially and then he said, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful to know" (Job 42:3b). Job had to go through the anger stage in order to come out on the other side with more character and wisdom. And only through this was he able to experience the blessings God gave him to their full extent.

2. It is all right to get angry.

God gave us the ability to feel anger. There are many examples in the Bible where even He feels anger. What does the Bible tell us about anger? Once you begin to get in touch with these feelings of anger, it may trigger every unfairness and injustice that you are experiencing. We are susceptible to becoming wrapped up in these feelings and remaining angry at the world. These are the feelings of anger that God warns us about; as He knows that they can become too prominent in our life and take our focus off of Him.

- "For man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:20).
- "Wise men turn away anger" (Proverbs 29:8b).

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- "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (Proverbs 29:11).

God understands that anger is a part of our human instinct, but it should never become our lifestyle. Some people may point out that it takes anger to get things accomplished. Even Mothers against Drunk Drivers seem to have an appropriate acronym of "MADD." Topf says, "We discover that anger is first and foremost a demand for change." Some would argue that the attitude of "I'm-not-going-to-take-it-any-more" has been the beginning of great changes in our history. And this is true, but the key is not to get stuck in that anger phase for the rest of your life.

In Amos 1:11 God says, "I will not turn back my wrath... because his anger raged continually." God is not upset with the fact that we justifiable feelings of anger, but because they can become continuous feelings that we insist on acting upon. The Lord calls us to refocus on Him and to use our anger to make positive changes that will ultimately bring Him glory.

3. Walk alongside God and He will walk with you through the anger.

David experienced this and wrote, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me." (Psalm 138:7). God is there when you need to feel angry and he wants to stretch out His hand against your anger and protect you.

"I'm still dealing with anger at this illness." explains Peggy, who lives with fibromyalgia. "Each time I realize I have another limitation, I experience anger. And yet, I know that God has a plan for my life that is perfect. As I become more adjusted to having chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia, and the limitations it places on my activities, I expect and pray for His perfect grace to become slow to anger, counting on the scripture, 'The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love'" (Psalm 103:8).

Coping effectively with anger will be a challenge we deal with for the rest of our lives. Some of the most vital guidance to cope with it is in a scripture that I point to in my book, "Why Can't I Make People Understand? Discovering the Validation Those with Chronic Illness Seek and Why" where I steer one through emotions of bitterness, jealousy and anger that accompanies illness.

Hosea 7:13b-14 says: God says, "I long to redeem [you] but. . . [you] do not cry out to Me from [your] hearts, but wait upon [your] beds." So don't flop down on your bed and wail "Why is this happening to me?" Instead pour out your heart to the Lord and merely ask Him for help.

If you lead a support group or are considering it, don't miss Lisa Copen's new book, <http://StarAnIllnessSupportGroup.com> for your ministry needs. Over 300 pages with step-by-step instructions on how to write a vision statement, promotion and attendance and much more!

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