

Fr. Perozich comments —

This older article from the New Oxford Review uses Catholic technique of the “distinctions” among emotions, reactions, behaviors, and what is right behavior. The author defines terms

It helps to sort out the understanding of anger, how to respond to hurtful situations by each of us when we confront them.

Unresolved anger may lead to a disproportionate rage in other situations, perhaps such as is seen today in mass murders and shootings.

Dr. Stolinsky comments on responses to anger.

He shows the results of repressed anger.

He shows that various people have a right to be angry in different ways at a situation, and how to express it properly if differently by each.

Dealing with anger in one way may help a victim, while society may use anger in another way to punish perpetrators.

A person is right to feel anger at atrocities and to feel revulsion as well.

Psychology is the study of why people behave in a certain way.

He shows the role of psychology in relieving suffering by sorting out emotional constrictions.

Ethics is the discipline of what people should do in obligations to others.

Religion should be about doing good, not just feeling good.

Compassion should be for victims rather than perpetrators.

This is not a complete treatise, but it may help the Catholic reader who frequently confesses anger in the Sacrament of Penance to know that it is normal to feel this emotion, and to find a proper outlet for the emotion to return to peace.

A Case for Anger

GUEST COLUMN

By David C. Stolinsky | [July/August 1998](#)

David C. Stolinsky, M.D., who is of the Jewish faith, lives in Los Angeles. He is semi-retired after 25 years of medical school teaching at the University of California at San Francisco and the University of Southern California.

Some time ago, the media carried the terrible story of a 10-year-old boy who was kidnapped at knife-point while playing near his home in a small California town. Neighbors and police mounted a massive search. Sixteen days later his naked body was found in the desert, his limbs bound with duct tape. The townspeople turned the search for the boy into a search for the murderer, but they were urged by the victim's mother to avoid anger and get on with their lives.

This advice would be echoed by many persons, from amateur psychologists to certain religious leaders. But is it good advice? Clearly, **relatives and friends of the victim should do anything that lessens their pain.** If avoiding anger at the killer, or even publicly forgiving him and praying for him, serves to mitigate their suffering, by all means let them do so. Let the relatives plunge into their work or withdraw from it; let them mingle with others or seek seclusion — whatever helps.

But what about the rest of us, who were not close to the victim? Should we avoid anger and just get on with our

lives? What is the proper response of civilized persons to violent crime?

I believe we have confused the proper response of relatives and friends with what everyone else should do. We have confused what is psychologically best for the relatives with what is morally best for the rest of us. *Psychology is a fascinating discipline that can do much to sort out emotional constrictions, but it has nothing to say about moral behavior.*

The emphasis of psychology, quite rightly, is on what people should do to relieve their emotional suffering, and not at all on what they should do to fulfill their obligations to others. That subject used to be taught by virtually all parents, teachers, and clergy. But parents today are often too busy to teach much of anything, and what time they have is devoted to telling their children how to be successful, not good. Teachers are barely able to teach reading, writing, and mathematics, as test scores show. Religion plays a minor role in the lives of many, and even here sermons are more likely to suggest how to feel good than how to do good.

We have, in short, substituted psychology (or rather pop psychology) for ethics, and we have thus given psychology a task it can never accomplish. **Psychology is the study of how people behave; ethics is the study of how they should behave.** For example, psychology has much to say about why people become child molesters, but nothing to say about whether sex with little children is morally wrong.

If we all inhibit our anger at those who hurt others, what will result? A few will succeed in ridding themselves of anger and will lead tranquil lives. But **most of us will merely suppress our anger temporarily, only to have it pop out unexpectedly.** The increasing outbursts of rage and violence in traffic encounters and domestic disputes may be evidence of this. **Those who advise against expressing anger at the guilty may be inadvertently encouraging its expression at the innocent or those who commit minor offenses.** Perhaps, for all of us who are not saints, **anger must be expressed at those who deserve it, or it will be expressed at those who don't.**

In fact, **psychotherapists often try to help patients discover who or what they are really angry at, so that they do not misdirect the anger onto others.** Unlike amateurs and promoters of pop psychology, most real psychologists do not deny the importance of anger. That is, **avoiding anger at criminals may help relatives of victims get through their acute grief, but it may be psychologically harmful for the rest of us — and it is morally wrong.**

Anger is often destructive, but it can also be constructive. Anger at kidnappers and child molesters can lead to stricter laws and thus to increased safety for children. Compassion for victims is appropriate, of course, but **compassion alone is unlikely to lead to anything except more victims —** who will then need more compassion. In the absence of anger at criminals,

compassion tends to be felt for both victims and criminals, thus inhibiting effective action against criminals. Compassion, like anger, can be constructive if it is directed at those who deserve it.

What, after all, is **a civilized person? I believe it is one who is not only saddened by the tragic, but also angered by the infuriating, disgusted by the revolting, and outraged by the atrocious.** Some would say that a civilized person is one who remains calm in the face of the infuriating, revolting, and atrocious, but this description fits a cow better than a human being. Cows are useful and peaceful animals, but they have lost the ability to protect themselves and their young from predators. They thus make poor role models.