

ARE LIONS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PEOPLE?

International responses to the killing of the lion [Cecil](#) by a “trophy hunter” have been extremely intense and “blew up the Internet.” Noted psychiatrist [David M. Reiss, MD](#) explains the public outrage and our individual reactions to the loss of Cecil.

Why did Cecil’s death trigger such massive outpourings of grief?

Innocent children, adults, and aged people die every day and are not publicly mourned. Is it “wrong” to feel sadness and anger for a lion?

Are [lions more important](#) than people?

No.

No reasonable person would think so.

Yet when emotions become involved, it is easy to lose perspective – often on both sides of a provocative issue.

The responses to the killing of the lion [Cecil](#) by a “trophy hunter” have been extremely intense and “[blew up the Internet.](#)” The reasons for massive outpourings of grief after what are objectively impersonal public losses are complex – not insignificantly related to the fact that to a notable extent, our society has lost the ability to allow people to truly grieve and mourn personal losses. Expectations regarding grief are quite rigid and limited, with high expectations to “bounce back” and return to functioning (and [return to work](#)) with minimal time to respect or process emotional reactions.

However, apart from those issues, the death of Cecil can be seen to have triggered intense reactions regarding what is and isn’t “tragic” and what our individual and collective responsibilities are in the face of tragedy and evil.

Regardless of personal religious or philosophical beliefs, it is not possible to deny that the world we inhabit is filled with beauty and wonder, as well as continuous tragedy and evil. To live fully is to appreciate and balance overwhelming awe and overwhelming sadness.

Whatever your thoughts and feelings are about hunting, the death of the beloved lion Cecil was sad. The portrayals of the event in the media *should* cause any reasonably compassionate person to feel sad. Whether or not the media portrayals were

“exaggerated” or “manipulative” is not relevant to the fact that the death of Cecil was sad; the death of Cecil was avoidable.

There is so much tragedy and evil in the world that it is not possible to react to every such situation as the event might truly merit. To fully appreciate the number of innocent persons – adults, children, aged – who suffer and die every day would be devastating if we were constantly aware of the scope of those tragedies. The reality is that without losing compassion, without losing respect, we each must choose how and when to react – how and when to openly display our emotions; and how and when to take action.

No person can react either emotionally or practically to every tragic or evil situation.

On paper, it certainly sounds cold, calculating and cavalier to say we must “pick our battles.” Yet that is exactly what reality forces every one of us to do. We can only fight a limited number of causes – and taking it to the extreme, even for the most noble reasons, one can only martyr oneself once.

Situations such as the death of Cecil allow for the expression of the repressed sadness we all carry.

There is nothing “wrong” with allowing such an event to serve as escape valve for repressed grief. There is nothing “wrong” with allowing such an event to become the focus for repressed mourning. There is nothing wrong with allowing such an event to act as an outlet for responsible expressions of anger.

Such reactions, within reason, do not demean, diminish or disrespect the innumerable other tragedies that occur *continuously*. In fact, if the recognition of these feelings encourages even a few people to be more compassionately involved in reducing suffering, some good has come from the tragedy.

If the sadness overcomes reason or if the anger turns to rage, violence or threats of violence, that is counter-productively fomenting even *more* suffering and becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Cecil’s death certainly was not “worse” than the suffering and death of innocent people. It is foolish to even contemplate such comparisons.

As a society, we *need* to feel sadness in reaction to situations such as Cecil’s death and we *need to use* that sadness to renew and restore our compassion and our motivation to decrease suffering of others – and in doing so, to honor and give meaning *all* victims of tragedy, suffering and evil.

About Dr. Reiss

David M. Reiss, MD, is an internationally acclaimed psychiatrist and lecturer. He has been recognized for expertise in character and personality dynamics, frequently giving invited lectures for clinical, legal, sport and entertainment audiences, as well as lay groups. His numerous publications include academic journals and newsletters.

Dr. Reiss is often interviewed and quoted in the print, Internet and radio/TV media, nationally and internationally on issues including personal development, medical and mental health treatment, PTSD, the psychology of socio-political systems and social phenomena (non-partisan), and specific psychosocial issues related to the sports and entertainment industries.

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