

Coping with

Traumatic Event Anniversaries

As the anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event approaches, many survivors report a return of restlessness and fear. Psychological literature calls it the “anniversary reaction” and defines it as an individual’s response to unresolved grief resulting from significant losses. This reaction can involve several days or even weeks of anxiety, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, depression, or fear.

However, the anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event also can provide an opportunity for emotional healing. Individuals can make significant progress in working through the natural grieving process by recognizing, acknowledging, and paying attention to the feelings and issues that surface during their anniversary reaction. These feelings and issues can help individuals develop perspective on the event and figure out where it fits in their hearts, minds, and lives.

It’s important to note that not all survivors of a disaster or traumatic event experience an anniversary reaction. Those who do, however, may be troubled because they did not expect and do not understand their reaction. Knowing in advance what to expect may be helpful.

Common Reactions Among Survivors of a Traumatic Event

- *Memories, Dreams, Thoughts, and Feelings* – Individuals may experience intrusive memories, thoughts and feelings about the event. They may see repeated images and scenes associated with the trauma or relive the event over and over. They may have recurring dreams or nightmares. These reactions may be as vivid on the anniversary as they were at the actual time of the disaster or traumatic event.
- *Grief and Sadness* – Individuals may experience grief and sadness related to the loss of income, employment, a home, or a loved one. Even people who have moved to new homes often feel a sense of loss on the anniversary. Those who were forced to relocate to another community may experience intense homesickness for their old neighborhoods.
- *Fear and Anxiety* – Fear and anxiety may resurface around the time of the anniversary, leading to jumpiness, startled responses, and vigilance about safety. These feelings may be particularly strong for individuals who are still working through the grieving process.
- *Frustration, Anger, and Guilt* – The anniversary may reawaken frustration and anger about the disaster or traumatic event. Survivors may be reminded of the possessions, homes, or loved ones they lost; the time taken away from their lives; the frustrations with bureaucratic aspects of the recovery process; and the slow process of rebuilding and healing. Individuals may also experience guilt about survival. These feelings may be particularly strong for individuals who are not fully recovered financially and emotionally.
- *Avoidance* – Some survivors try to protect themselves from experiencing an anniversary reaction by avoiding reminders of the event and attempting to treat the anniversary as just an ordinary day.

In Healing

- *Remembrance* – Many survivors welcome the cleansing tears, commemoration, and fellowship that the anniversary of the event offers. They see it as a time to honor the memory of what they have lost. They might light a candle, share favorite memories and stories, or attend a worship service.

- *Reflection* – The reflection brought about by the anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event is often a turning point in the recovery process. It is an opportunity for people to look back over the past year, recognize how far they have come, and give themselves credit for the challenges they have surmounted. It is a time for survivors to look inward and to recognize and appreciate the courage, stamina, endurance, and resourcefulness that they and their loved ones showed during the recovery process. It is a time for people to look around and pause to appreciate their family members, friends and others who supported them through the healing process. It is also a time when most people can look forward with a renewed sense of hope and purpose.
- *Time* – Understand that it is normal to have strong reactions to a disaster or traumatic event and its devastation many months later. Recovery takes time and it requires rebuilding on many levels—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. However, with patience, understanding, and support from family members and friends, survivors can emerge even stronger than before.

Seek Assistance

If you are having trouble coping, ask for help. Consult a counselor or mental health professional. In the workplace, you may be able to get assistance from your human resources department or your company's Employee Assistance Program.

For more information,
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