

Anniversary Reactions to Trauma: The Recovery Process Continues

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'. The anniversary reaction can involve several days or even weeks of anxiety, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, depression or fear.

On a more positive note, 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 recognising, 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 is 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. For these individuals, knowing what to expect in advance may be helpful. Common anniversary reactions among survivors of a disaster or traumatic event include the following:

- **Memories, dreams, thoughts and feelings** – Individuals may replay memories, thoughts and feelings about the event, which they can't turn off. 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 neighbourhoods.
- **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. Even for these people, it can be helpful to learn about common reactions that they or their loved ones may encounter, so they are not surprised if reactions occur.
- **Remembrance** – Many survivors welcome the cleansing tears, commemoration and fellowship that the anniversary of the event offers. They see it as a time to honour the memory of what they have lost. They might light a candle, share favourite 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, recognise how far they have come and give themselves credit for the challenges they surmounted. It is a time for survivors to look inward and to recognise 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 the 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.

Although these thoughts, feelings and reactions can be very upsetting, it helps to understand that it is normal to have strong reactions to a disaster or traumatic event and its devastation many months later. Recovery from a disaster or traumatic event takes time, and it requires rebuilding on many levels – physically, emotionally and spiritually. However, with patience, understanding and support from family members and friends, you can emerge from a disaster or traumatic event stronger than before.

If you are still having trouble coping, ask for help. Consult a counsellor 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 programme (EAP).

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