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The Anniversary Effect - What it is and How to Cope

The anniversary effect refers to experiencing grief, loss or trauma before and around the anniversary of a significant event. Individuals might feel restless or on edge, experience symptoms of PTSD, have trouble sleeping, feel depressed, or even become physically ill. Various situations can trigger this response, such as a death, miscarriage, accident or assault.

The anniversary effect is a collection of disturbing feelings, thoughts, and/or memories that can occur on or around the anniversary of a traumatic event. This phenomenon commonly affects those with PTSD or those who have lost a loved one, such as a parent or grandparent.

Why Do People Experience Anniversary Reactions?

Anniversary reactions are common when someone has experienced trauma or loss on a specific date in years past. Because the body and mind remember trauma, people can continue to have reactions to painful or life-changing events throughout their lives.

Common Anniversary Reaction Symptoms

Many people feel unsettled, restless, or anxious before or around the anniversary of a traumatic event or loss. This response is normal and often expected. Someone may experience symptoms of PTSD, including nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive images, fear, anger, or difficulty sleeping. Depression, sadness, and dread are other emotions that can make functioning difficult.

Common anniversary reactions include:

- **Flashbacks**

PTSD flashbacks are sudden, vivid memories of the event. People may feel like the event is happening in the present, even re-experiencing the trauma through taste, smell, or body sensations.

- **Stress response**

The amygdala responds to traumatic memories by preparing the body for fight-or-flight. A trauma anniversary can trigger similar reactions as when the event occurred, including sweaty palms, increased heart rate, chest pressure, or difficulty breathing.

- **Frustration and anger**

The anniversary of an event can be frustrating for those who have not healed their trauma. People may experience anger at the unfairness of the situation or the resulting changes.

- **Distressing memories, thoughts, and feelings**

The unconscious mind has a way of linking dates with traumatic events. Memories, thoughts, and emotions can arise before individuals even realize the anniversary is nearing.

- **Body sensations or pain**

Some people might notice physical sensations related to the event. For example, abdominal pain felt during a traumatic event can resurface around the anniversary.

- **Anxiety**

Anticipation, dread, and worry about an upcoming event manifest as anxiety. People may feel restless, irritable, or tense. They may ruminate on the event or have a free-floating sense of worry or fear.

- **Dreams**

Dreams allow the brain to process and make sense of an event. However, anniversaries can trigger distressing nightmares. In other cases, some find comfort in visitation dreams in which they see deceased loved ones.

- **Avoidance**

As a trauma anniversary approaches, survivors may engage in avoidance behaviour by avoiding people, places, or other trauma triggers. This behaviour can be a way to manage or cope with unpleasant memories.

How to cope with the Anniversary Effect

Fortunately, people can take healthy steps to reduce distress or anxiety as a trauma anniversary approaches. First, being aware of and prepared for the potential reactions can be very helpful. You may feel unsettled or upset during this stressful time, so practice self-compassion, patience, and reverence as you cope.

Here are 9 ways to cope with the anniversary effect:

- ✓ **Prepare ahead of time**

Planning for the anniversary ahead of time can help with the feeling of dread and anticipatory anxiety that may arise. For example, consider making plans for the days leading up to or just after the date scheduling extra self-care, or reaching out to your support network.

- ✓ **Commemorate the event**

Unresolved grief can contribute to an anniversary effect. Some people find commemorating the event with a ritual, ceremony, or even a celebration of survival is beneficial. Use some grief journaling prompts to write about or think through the event and your feelings. Ask yourself, "Do some aspects of the event still feel unresolved?"

✓ **Talk with a friend or family member**

Coping with an anniversary effect can be tough. However, you are not alone during this time. Talking your feelings through with a trusted friend or loved one can be a great way to process emotions and get support. Let people know ahead of time what may be helpful. Isolating yourself around an anniversary can be tempting, but this behaviour often worsens the situation.

✓ **Share your feelings with others**

Talking with others who experienced the event can be cathartic and validating. Going through a traumatic event together creates a bond of shared experience. Spending time with other survivors can provide relief without having to recount or explain the event.

✓ **Set boundaries with information about the event**

Limiting exposure to constant reminders of worldwide events can be difficult. However, cutting back on screen time on the days before and after the actual date can be helpful.

✓ **Remember how far you've come**

Thinking about how you've grown since the event can be very therapeutic. Even the hardest experiences can have a positive effect on your life. Revisit the healthy changes in your journal or with a loved one. Have any positive or unexpected gifts come from your past? Changing your perspective can facilitate post-traumatic growth and healing.

✓ **Remember your reactions are ok and normal**

You may feel anxious, scared, sad, or restless before the anniversary of a traumatic event, as your body feels threatened or under stress. Reminding yourself these feelings are temporary can help you pass through them. Tell yourself, "This is just adrenaline. I am safe."

✓ **Have extra support after the anniversary**

Evidence suggests the days following an anniversary are often the hardest for people. Have extra support or meaningful activities prepared. You can also create a crisis plan for if or when symptoms become severe, or you experience thoughts of self-harm.

✓ **Give yourself time**

Be compassionate with yourself and your progress when coping with an anniversary effect. Trauma does not disappear immediately, and recovery takes time. Allow yourself space to grieve and experience your emotions as you work toward healing from trauma.



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Strength and Support on a Trauma Anniversary

We often think of anniversaries as positive milestones worth celebrating like weddings, first dates, birthdays, and graduations.

But we may also remember dates associated with traumatic events, such as a loved one's death, a medical diagnosis, a natural disaster, or an assault. Dates like these are sometimes called trauma anniversaries.

The unsettling feelings that come with these dates are sometimes referred to as "the anniversary effect." The ways it manifests vary, as do the mechanisms people use to cope. Among the important things individuals and communities can do to offer support are normalizing the emotions that come with these experiences and ensuring access to mental health treatment for those who need it.

Feeling the Effects of a Traumatic Experience

Trauma anniversaries can cause any number of feelings, from sadness and grief to anger and anxiety. Some people may become irritable or aggressive, have trouble sleeping, or even feel physically ill. People with PTSD may experience symptoms of reliving an event, through flashbacks, memories, or dreams.

A trauma anniversary doesn't always result in anxiety or negative feelings. Many people find strength in creating a routine that commemorates the day, says Laura Murray, PhD, MA, a senior scientist in Mental Health and a clinical psychologist. On the anniversary of a loved one's death, for example, "they might take the day off work, go out to lunch, visit the person's grave, or attend a ceremony."

Murray says that it's expected to feel upset when reminded of a traumatic experience, and acknowledging and normalizing that type of response is something anyone—a mental health professional or everyday person—can do. "One of the things we've always tried to do in our work is not to over-pathologize," she says. "Is it normal for some to be upset by something traumatic? Yes. Does that mean you have PTSD? Not necessarily."

More Than a Day

While an anniversary itself is a single date in time, its effect can start in the days and weeks leading up to it and last beyond the day itself. "There are some folks

that, even months before, are nervous about the anniversary,” says Murray. “They’re thinking about it, trying to figure out how to manage it—we sometimes describe this as spinning.”

Anniversary reactions can also be felt on days other than the anniversary of the event itself. Following the death of a loved one, for example, similar feelings may crop up not just on the anniversary of their death, but also on the person’s birthday. Recognitions like Memorial Day may trigger the effect for veterans who lost friends to war, as can times of year for people who have experienced natural disasters.

How to Support an Individual Through a Trauma Anniversary

Being there for one another can help limit mental health problems, says Murray. But how you support someone can vary depending on the person. “You need to know that person and what they want or need,” she says. Some people are open about their experiences and want opportunities to share, while others prefer to reflect privately.

“And if you don’t know, ask,” Murray says, emphasizing that it’s best to do this well before the anniversary.

Finding Strength When a Trauma Anniversary Affects You

“We coach people that have experienced trauma to speak up to the people close to them about what they need,” Murray says. This might mean emailing or texting friends to ask that they please not mention a death or traumatic experience to them on its anniversary, or asking specific people to spend time with you that day as a distraction.

Mental health experts recommend that everyone identify a person, or multiple people, that you can reach out to in times of distress. Knowing who those people are will make asking for help at the moment much easier.

It’s also important to recognise that it’s normal for a person’s response to a trauma anniversary to vary over time. “Every person is different, every event is different, and their perspective changes as they age,” Murray says, emphasizing that people shouldn’t set expectations for themselves or others.

Cognitive coping is an evidence-based cognitive behavioural therapy that everyone can practice and benefit from, whether or not they’ve experienced trauma, and that can be used both preventatively or to cope with a specific challenge. Put simply, it involves training your brain to think about a situation in a different way—ideally one that’s more constructive or positive. “That’s where we have our power,” Murray says. “We can’t control other people or situations, but we can control what goes through our head.”



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Managing Distress of a Traumatic Event Anniversary

The anniversary of a traumatic event can trigger distressing memories and emotions. It reminds us that unpredictable events can touch us all. We may recall pain, suffering, and loss. The intensity of our emotions can take us by surprise and feel overwhelming. We can't erase the memories or turn off natural emotional reactions. We can choose how we respond to them.

Responding to Anniversary Reactions

- **Anticipate a response**

Know that it's normal to have strong feelings around the anniversary date of a traumatic event. Let others who care about you know that this may be a difficult time. Ask for the support you may need. Arrange your schedule to allow a time and a place to grieve if needed.

- **Allow your reaction**

Don't try to ignore or deny your feelings. You may feel grief, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, or something else. You may just feel numb. These are all normal reactions. Talking with people who care about you can help you process your feelings. Cry if you need to. Some people find it helpful to let feelings flow out on paper or address them in a creative way, such as with painting or music.

- **Find meaningful ways to honour the day**

Perhaps you have your own rituals. You may prefer to be with others — family, friends, or the community. Commemorative ceremonies or activities allow us to express our feelings and remind us that we're not alone in our grief. Helping others can be another positive way to mark the day such as volunteering or making a donation. This can be an antidote to the sadness and helplessness that resurge on anniversaries.

- **Reach out**

Leaning on others who care about you can help you feel stronger in difficult times. Talking to others keeps you from being alone with troubling memories. You can get other viewpoints and a chance to share your feelings. It's also an opportunity to enjoy time together and allow your focus to shift away from thoughts of the tragedy.

- **Find ways to restore balance**

If your mind is caught up in “what-ifs” or “if-only’s,” try to bring your thoughts to this moment instead. See if you can stay in the here and now. Focus on your breathing and take nice slow, deep breaths. Try to release the stress from your body as you breathe out. Try these simple techniques or other activities that help you relax and release tension—reading a good book, walking outdoors, or enjoying a hobby. Avoid substance use or other unhealthy coping methods.



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Source: *Managing Distress of a Traumatic Event Anniversary*

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PTSD and Trauma

Many of us experience traumatic events of one kind or another in our lives. For most of us, given time and support we recover well. However, for some people, a traumatic event can trigger what's known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. This article talks about the difference between trauma and PTSD, some of the symptoms to look out for, and most importantly how to get help.

The difference between trauma and PTSD

Traumatic events include events involving actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence. For an event to be potentially traumatic, it may not have occurred to you but could have been something you saw happen, or something that you found out happened to a close family member or friend. First responders to emergencies or people in similar situations who have repeated or extreme exposure to the aftermath of trauma can also be impacted in this way.

An event like this doesn't have to result in PTSD. With the appropriate time and support, many people recover from even deeply distressing events very well.

However for some people, especially without any psychological support, exposure to events like these can lead to symptoms of PTSD. These symptoms include:

- **A sense of reliving the traumatic event** – for example flashbacks, nightmares, feeling the event is recurring or thoughts you can't escape
- **Avoidance and numbing** – feeling emotionally flat or losing interest in activities you used to enjoy, feeling disconnected to family or friends, or avoiding people, places or activities associated with the traumatic event
- **Negative thoughts and mood** – feeling down or negative about yourself, others or the world and having distorted views about the causes or consequences of the event
- **Feeling wound up** – feelings of irritability, anger, frustration, edginess, difficulties concentrating and trouble sleeping are all also common with PTSD.

Not everyone who experiences a trauma will go on to develop PTSD. However PTSD is serious and can be associated with other mental health conditions like depression, anxiety and drug or alcohol use. If you or a loved one has experienced a trauma and need support, or feel like you may be experiencing PTSD, it's important to seek help. Support is available and remember, you're not alone.



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