



Anniversary Reactions to a Traumatic Event

The Recovery Process Continues

As the anniversary of a disaster or traumatic event approaches, many report a return of restlessness and fear. The ***anniversary reaction*** is 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 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 is important to note that ***not*** all people involved with a 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 of a traumatic event include:

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 incident.

Grief and Sadness: Individuals may experience grief and sadness related to the loss of the situation. This includes feeling sad for those who experienced loss of a loved one.

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 connected to the response (tactics, decision making, etc.) of the traumatic event.

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.

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 those killed.

Reflection: The reflection brought about by the anniversary of a 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 surmounted. It is a time to look inward and to recognize and appreciate the courage, stamina, endurance, and resourcefulness that they showed. It is a time for people to look around and pause to appreciate the family members, friends, and others who supported them in the aftermath of that incident. 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 traumatic event and its devastation many months later. Recovery from a traumatic event takes time, and it requires rebuilding on many levels - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. However, with patience, understanding, and support from your family at home, the law enforcement family, peer support and mental health professionals, you can emerge from a traumatic event stronger than before.

Information provided by:

<http://new.dhh.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/BehavioralHealth/LaSpirit/13AnniversaryReactionstoTraumaticEvent.pdf>