

Marking Painful Anniversaries

The anniversary of a sad event can bring up many painful emotions, including grief, fear, anger, and sadness, sometimes with surprising intensity. These feelings are normal and very common around the anniversary of a loss or traumatic event, and marking a painful anniversary is an understandable way to acknowledge the importance that a person or event played in our lives.

Here are some tips and suggestions to cope with painful anniversaries:

Resurfacing emotions

Whether they're connected to a death, divorce, or tragic event, anniversaries can bring up feelings and emotions you thought you left behind. You may have recurring thoughts of the event that make it hard to get through your regular routine. You may also experience any or all of these emotions:

- a sense of loss
- anger
- anxiety
- fear
- loneliness
- sadness
- survivor guilt
- vulnerability

These feelings can occur at any age. Here are some ways to deal with feelings of grief that come back to the surface when an anniversary occurs:

Identify the feelings you are experiencing and understand that they are in reaction to the anniversary. Sometimes people don't realize that an anniversary is having a strong effect on them. If you notice that you feel afraid, angry, or sad just before an anniversary, try to accept that these feelings are a normal reaction to a reminder of a painful event. Don't avoid your feelings. They can provide an opportunity to further resolve your grief.

Recognize that a painful anniversary may affect you differently than it does others. You may find it very hard to cope, while friends, family, or neighbors may have an easier time. Remember that everyone reacts differently to a loss and avoid comparing your reactions to others. Be patient with yourself and those around you.

Talk with friends and family about how you're feeling. This is an important part of coping and healing. Grief is a very personal and individual experience, but you don't have to manage it in isolation. By sharing your emotions with the people you love and trust, you can lessen the burden.

Remind yourself that you have overcome painful situations and trauma in the past. Try to remember what you did to cope with strong emotions before and remind yourself that you will get through this again. Take time to appreciate and honor what you've been through as you've adjusted to your loss.

Limit exposure to media coverage if you are dealing with a public anniversary such as an act of violence or terrorism or a natural disaster. Images and reports in the media have the power to bring you back in time to the emotions and pain you felt during the tragedy. If you find that media coverage upsets you or makes you uncomfortably sad or tense, avoid watching coverage of the anniversary.

Consider taking extra steps if you have had multiple losses. As you get older, the effect of an anniversary may seem more intense because you have lost other people you loved in unrelated events over the course of time. If this has happened, you may want to take extra steps that can make the day easier. For example, seek out a friend who has had similar experiences and spend time together. Or, if you have strong ties to a faith community, you may want to talk with a clergy member or religious leader who has helped many people who have had multiple losses.

Finding a positive way to mark a painful anniversary.

Plan for how you'll handle a significant anniversary that includes some positive activities. This doesn't mean that you should ignore your feelings by trying to keep yourself busy, but you can intentionally choose positive and constructive ways to cope with those feelings. If you have experienced a deep personal loss such as the death of a spouse or sibling, it may be helpful to involve others who knew the person or understand how much the person meant to you, reducing isolation and increasing your natural support.

Doing something constructive may lessen feelings of powerlessness, which is a common reaction to traumatic events. Talk with friends, family, or others about how you can mark this anniversary. You may decide to attend a remembrance or memorial service, or just take a few quiet moments during the day to remember the event and those who were affected by it. Here are some other ideas:

- Attend a religious service.
- Gather people together to share memories and stories informally.
- Have a "moment of silence" to remember the event and its effect.
- Plant a tree or shrub in memory of those who lost their lives.
- Read or write a special poem.
- Write a letter or journal entry to your loved one.

Some people report that the feelings they experience during a painful anniversary may not be limited to that day but may begin before and last well beyond the event. You may find it easier to cope if you

try to spend time with the people you love, doing things that make you feel better during this time. Try to take care of yourself physically—make sure that you eat properly and get the rest you need to stay energized and emotionally healthy.

If recurring feelings of sadness or grief are interfering with your ability to work, cope, or enjoy life, you may want to seek professional help.

Helping children cope with a painful anniversary.

Painful anniversaries raise special concerns if they involve your children, grandchildren, or others who are important to you. Children may not even be aware of an anniversary date, but they do notice the reactions of people around them.

Talk with your child about why this is a sad time for you if you will be spending time together on or near the date. Explain what you are doing to deal with your feelings so that children aren't confused or worried about why you're feeling the way you are.

Realize that children feel many of the same emotions adults do. Encourage children to talk to you about how they are feeling. Some children may be afraid to share because they feel like they're not "normal." Assure children that their emotions are OK and that they can always talk with you about their thoughts and feelings. If children don't want to talk about the anniversary, tell them that's OK, too. Let them know you're there for them. For younger children, identifying and naming their emotions with words may be too difficult; drawing pictures can be an effective way to help them express their feelings.

Let children know that they are safe. Anniversaries of tragic events may bring back feelings of vulnerability for children or make them think a catastrophe will happen again. Reassure them that you are there to protect them and that the family is safe. Let them know that people are working together to help make everyone safer.

Remind children that tragic events happen very rarely. This is an important message to convey if you are marking a painful public anniversary together such as the anniversary of an act of violence or terrorism. Because media images can have a powerful effect, it is best to limit TV or media exposure for young children and to watch the coverage with older children so you can discuss what they are seeing or hearing. Media coverage can lead some children to believe that catastrophes or traumatic events happen frequently, but the reality is that they are very rare.

Try to accept the difficult memories and emotions that may come with a painful anniversary as a normal part of the recovery process. Doing so will enable you to purposefully think of the positive things you can do to mark and honor the event. However, if recurring feelings of sadness or grief are interfering with your ability to work, cope, or enjoy life, you may want to seek professional help. You might benefit from working with a counselor. Contact your employee assistance program for support.