

# Grief and Loss Around an Anniversary

## What is an anniversary reaction?

An anniversary reaction is the annual reminder of a trauma or loss, such as the death of someone important, a traumatic experience like an assault or car accident, or military combat. Anniversary reactions are incredibly common and are not typically a setback in the grieving process.

## What causes an anniversary reaction?

For many people, the anniversary date of a person's death or a traumatic incident will be the main reminder of the loss. For others, reminders will be tied to sights, sounds, and smells, or light, weather, or other seasonal reminders like going back to school in the fall or holidays. Often these reminders can be completely unexpected and can take a person unawares. Many people experience both expected and unexpected reminders of the traumatic event.

## What can I expect when I have an anniversary reaction?

Even though the pattern of an anniversary reaction might be predictable because it happens around certain dates, the reaction itself can be very different depending on each person. Anniversary reactions often last for days or weeks at a time. People might experience the intense emotions and reactions they first experienced during the traumatic event, or they might experience a spike in sadness, anxiety, or depression that feels unconnected to the event. It is also common for people to feel anger, guilt, fatigue, lack of energy, loneliness, sadness, or have trouble sleeping.

## What are some strategies or tips that can help?

- **Prepare.** The first-year anniversary is often the hardest, but anniversary reactions are normal after any amount of time. It can help to know you're likely to experience anniversary reactions and plan for them. You might eliminate extra stressors around this time or plan to spend some time alone. Or you may decide to schedule a visit with friends during a time when you think you'll feel too alone or will have lots of reminders of the trauma.
- **Let yourself experience the anniversary however you feel is best.** It's okay to let it be "just a day" and not do anything different than any other day. It's also okay to remember and do something special that day, such as visiting the cemetery, donating to a related non-profit, or sending a card to someone connected with the event. Everyone grieves differently, and not everyone has the same needs.
- **Remember that it's temporary.** Anniversary reactions usually subside within a few weeks. Knowing that there's light at the end can make the tunnel less frightening.
- **Reach out and connect.** Reach out to the people who support you, especially people who know about your loss. Stay connected with your usual support systems, such as spiritual leaders, social groups, or a therapist. It is okay to take a break from people who you do not feel supported by and just surround yourself with people who feel helpful. You might find yourself both laughing and crying with your people...that is okay.
- **Find Support.** If you notice that you are having intense feelings of anxiety or sadness that aren't going away, you are experiencing frightening flashbacks of the event, or you are struggling to function with daily life, it would be good to seek out additional support. There are many techniques out there that can help with nightmares and can soothe other trauma symptoms. You can call Connections (221-5551) for referrals to community resources, or Pathways Center for Grief and Loss (663-3500) for additional grief resources and support.

# How to Support Children with Anniversary Grief

Children of all ages experience anniversary reactions just like adults. Even when they don't remember the exact date of a death or trauma anniversary, children will experience reminders that may be tied to sights, sounds, and smells, or light, weather, or other seasonal reminders.

## What can I expect if my child has an anniversary reaction?

Every child's anniversary reaction will look different, just like adults. Some of the most common symptoms are loss of interest or pleasure in routine activities or interests, sleep or appetite changes, anxiety, acting out, and emotional agitation or misbehavior that is not typical for that child. Children might also feel restless, forgetful, or have a difficult time paying attention in class. You may also find that children regress to younger behaviors such as wetting the bed or wanting to be around you all the time.

It is normal for a child's body to know an anniversary is approaching because of seasonal reminders, even when they are not consciously aware of the date of an anniversary. For this reason, children can often exhibit the above behaviors without understanding why they are behaving that way, which can cause additional confusion and uncertainty.

## What can I do to support my child?

- **Talk to your child.** While it may be painful to bring up those feelings of grief, acknowledging the trauma or the deceased individual in a positive, supportive way truly does help work through those feelings. Remember that children may be experiencing tough emotions without understanding why they are feeling that way, which can be scary. Talking about it helps them to name what is going on so they can make sense of what has been happening to them. It also helps build connection and trust with you, because they see that you are not afraid to talk about these tough emotions with them. A few simple talking points are below:
  - "I notice that you've been having some tough feelings lately. You seem sad and you're having a hard time concentrating. I have been feeling that way too. I wonder if you've been thinking about (x) since it happened at this time last year?"
- **Follow your child's lead.** Some children may not want to say much about how they are feeling. Others will want to talk all about it and may want to participate in activities to process a trauma or remember a person who has died. Respect what your child is ready for and don't pressure them. Some simple activity ideas are below:
  - For a child who does not want to talk: it is common for children to struggle to express their feelings in words, especially if their feelings are scary. If your child is showing symptoms of an anniversary reaction but does not want to talk about it, consider drawing or playing with them and letting them take the lead as you play. This can help them express their feelings to you through their play or artwork, even if they never say it in words.
  - For a child who does want to talk: children who are interested in processing might be willing to draw or write about their feelings, create a collage about a person who has died, or make a list of people who help them feel better when they are struggling. Also consider activities such as making cards for the family of a deceased person, visiting a cemetery, or donating to a related charity. Often, doing something for someone else can help children regain a sense of control and purpose.
- **Be patient with yourself and with your child.** Your child's behaviors during this time might be challenging, especially if you are also grieving. Remember that anniversary reactions don't last forever. Be patient with them as they are grieving, but also extend that patience to yourself. This may be a time to plan take out instead of cooking, schedule a massage, or have someone you trust watch your kids so you can have a night away. The more you take care of yourself, the better you will be able to respond to your child's needs.
- **Reach out if needed.** If you notice that your child's feelings and behaviors are intense and aren't going away, it would be good to seek out additional support. Your student's School Counselor would be happy to help direct you to additional resources to support your child, or you can call Cayac for referrals at 221-3308.