

THE ANNIVERSARY DILEMMA

Anniversaries of tragedies can be difficult times for many people. For some, the anniversary date is a powerful reminder of loss. Family members and close friends experience the sadness, emptiness, and pain of a life which now only offers them a gaping hole in the fabric of life where there once was a vibrant and cherished person. For others, who may have tried to deny the tragedy's occurrence, the anniversary may break through their defenses and produce unexpected grief and feelings of despair.

Some people believe that if they got through the first year after a terrible event happened, the worst is over for them. They have lived through a year full of generally "awful firsts." For example, the first birthday without their family member or friend or the first Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, or New Year may have produced poignant moments of pain for those left behind. Those poignant moments may pile up and produce their most serious impact during an anniversary time. The development of unexpected and intense feelings of grief can be overpowering for those who thought they had successfully denied their grief.

Still others see an anniversary of a tragedy as a milestone along the path to recovery. They hope that passing through the first anniversary will reassure them that a restoration of somewhat normal level of life activities is not only possible but that it is also close at hand. They realize that they have lived a whole year without their special person and they feel more confident that they can now make it through another. The doubts they once felt about their ability to survive without the loved one become less prominent.

Those who survived a tragedy, whether they were wounded or not, often find anniversaries bitter-sweet experiences. They are grateful that they lived through situations in which others perished, yet they feel intense guilt about the fact that others died. Intense feelings of terror and threat reverberate in their minds and hearts. Vivid dreams disturb their sleep. Anger and resentment toward those who caused significant changes in their lives predominate over calmer feelings. It is hard for anybody to feel the same around the anniversary of some significant tragedy.

Administrators of organizations, government agencies, and clergy in a wide range of congregations as well as family members and friends wonder what they should do to properly honor the memory of the dead while simultaneously alleviating the suffering of the living. The following suggestions may be useful guidelines for those who want to know what to do to deal with anniversaries of tragedies.

1. Each individual may deal with the anniversary of a tragedy in their own way. The first rule of managing the anniversary of a traumatic event is that there are few hard and fast rules. Some people need to visit the site of the tragedy, or a grave or a memorial site. Some will go to a place of worship and pray for their dead. Others will visit those who have sustained injuries or they will bring together friends and family for a quiet meal.

Some need to express themselves in a public manner with other people while others need to manage the anniversary in a very private manner. No particular method of managing one's loss and grief is better than other methods. We all need to be understanding and tolerant of the methods people choose to deal with their grief. Their personality, culture and background may suggest to them different paths for the expression of their grief.

2. Public or private rituals can help people who are struggling with fear and loss. It is up to the individual to choose the rituals which will help the most. Many people need and choose a companion to accompany them through the rituals surrounding the anniversary. It is helpful to offer to go with someone if it appears that they may have to face the ritual alone. If a person chooses to attend a ceremony by themselves, that choice should be respected.

3. Spiritually oriented memorial services can alleviate much pain. They should be carefully planned and presented. The more public citizens who are likely to attend, the greater the need for these services to be non-denominational.

4. Grief seminars and other educational programs can help individuals or groups. Note: if both an educational program and a secular or spiritual memorial service are planned to be connected to each other, the secular or spiritual memorial service should go last. The reason is that educational programs tend to open people up and bring their pain to the surface. Spiritual and non-spiritual memorial services tend to "re-box" the grief so that hope of recovery is enhanced.

5. When remains have not been recovered, the families and friends tend to suffer much more. They lack a sense of completeness of the loss. The anniversary often enhances the sense that the loss is truly not finished for them. Doubts remain about the reality of the loss of a loved one. This has certainly been the experience of those who have had loved ones lost at sea or dead within the earth as in a mining accident. No doubt, those whose remains were not recovered after the collapse of the World Trade Center will be sorely missed by their relatives and friends. The relatives often have a need to go as close to the area where their loved one was last known to be. They grieve their loss there.

6. It is perfectly acceptable for people to respectfully inquire about a person or a family or group's well being during the anniversary time. The sending of cards, flowers, or memorial wreaths is acceptable according to cultural practices.

7. It is not unusual for people to experience behavioral changes for several weeks before and after an anniversary. Withdrawal, angry outbursts, emotional tirades, crying spells, overwhelming sadness, lack of attention to detail, loss of interest in school or work activities and poor treatment of friends, co-workers and family members are fairly common around anniversary times. Grief does not get processed according to some pre-set schedule. For some, the intensity of their grief reactions gradually lessens over time. Some people have found that the second or third anniversary is much more difficult for them than the first. Never tell a grieving person that they should be over it by now. Never

tell them that they just have to let go and move on. Those words of “advice” will cause more pain. Understanding, patience, and gentle support are most helpful during these stressful times around the anniversary.

8. People who are experiencing grief reactions around anniversaries should not be treated as abnormal. Anyone who is experiencing particularly intense, difficult, long-lasting or significantly disruptive grief reactions should be encouraged to seek help.

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Author: Jeffrey T. Mitchell, PhD, CTS