

## **Psychology Today**

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# **5 Ways to Deal with Anniversary Reactions**

## **What do you do when anniversary memories are anything but silver or gold?**

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Anniversaries aren't just for couples, and some aren't so happy. The anniversary reaction: it's the annual echo of a trauma or loss such as the death of a beloved, a nightmarish experience like sexual assault, a near-fatal accident, or military combat.

Regardless of what happened, the anniversary reaction is specifically timed (hence the name), emotionally invested, and truly distressing. Moreover, it's common; some researchers think the anniversary reaction should even be an official symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

But despite the patterns being predictable, the reactions themselves are as varied as the individuals experiencing them. Sometimes, the mind remembers, even unconsciously, and a psychological reaction—like a spike in depression or PTSD—can be triggered by the weather, the light, or other seasonal reminders like back to school or the first signs of spring.

For example, a study conducted by the Yale University School of Medicine looked at anniversary reactions in veterans of the early 1990s Gulf War. Several years after the war ended, each veteran, along with his or her spouse, was asked how well the veteran functioned over each of the previous 12 months. Each person identified the veteran's worst month, best month, the month with the most PTSD symptoms, and the month with the fewest. Then, the researchers compared the veterans' functioning to documented dates of their traumatic war experiences.

The result? Anniversary reactions were real. Far more frequently than by chance alone, the months of worst functioning and greater PTSD symptoms lined up with the months in which their trauma had occurred. Veterans reported internal symptoms like unwanted memories, getting easily startled at war-related reminders, and increasing their effort not to think about the war. Spouses—who sometimes reported the anniversary reactions more accurately than the veterans themselves—reported externally visible signs like emotional distance, irritability, and disturbed sleep.

Along with the mind, the body remembers, with the not-so-coincidental occurrences of physical problems like cardiac events, pneumonia, and pleurisy (that's inflammation of the tissues that line the lungs—I had to look it up, too).

For example, in a 2015 study, researchers at Stockholm University tracked nearly 50,000 parents who had lost a child anytime between 1973 and 2008. Bereaved mothers who also died between 1973 and

2008 had an increased chance of dying during the anniversary week of their child's death, especially of a cardiovascular-related event. The association was even stronger among mothers who lost a child who was older than 12 months.

Finally, anniversary reactions have even been recorded over an entire community. In 2000, Hat Yai, a community in Thailand, experienced severe flooding. After the flood, researchers followed 400 residents, checking for PTSD symptoms every couple of months. As the months passed, residents' PTSD scores steadily declined, but on the one-year anniversary of the flood, scores spiked, particularly among residents where flooding was the worst and rescue work had been the most difficult.

So how can you handle your own anniversary reaction? Try these five tips:

**Tip #1: Prepare.** The first year after an event, it's hard to know what will happen, but if you sense you might be vulnerable, or you've experienced an anniversary reaction before, do your best to plan ahead. Eliminate extra stressors—try not to move or change jobs around that time of year—and load up on seeing supportive friends and family. If you see a therapist, arrange to see him or her more frequently for as long as you need.

**Tip #2: Commemorate.** In addition to delaying stress and upping support, consider making a specific plan that relates directly to your loss or trauma. Visit the cemetery, make a donation to a related non-profit, or sign up for an associated charity event. You might feel empowered and liberated.

**Tip #3: Remember it's temporary.** Anniversary reactions usually subside within a few weeks. I've worked with patients whose anniversary distress can last as long as a season, but most have a tough couple of weeks and then come out the other side noticeably lighter. Knowing there's a light at the end can make the tunnel less frightening.

**Tip #4: Be aware of "The Birthday Effect."** In a similar phenomenon, trauma survivors may also have spikes in grief or sadness unconnected to the trauma anniversary. For instance, the holiday season is a big one, but birthdays pose a particular challenge. Why? Folks with PTSD often believe that they will die young or otherwise face a foreshortened future. Consequently, birthdays become fraught with anxiety as they sense the end nearing. Likewise, if PTSD symptoms linger or go untreated, birthdays may remind them of time that was lost, or that another year has passed without things getting better. Indeed, rather than looking ahead, a birthday with active PTSD often makes survivors look behind, and what they see is dark, which is where we turn to Tip #5.

**Tip #5: Find support.** If you weren't fortunate enough to get help after the original trauma or loss, or the help you got didn't go so well, it's common to feel frustrated or ashamed that you're still dealing with your trauma years later. But it's never too late to start looking for support—I've seen people reclaim their lives 10, 20, even 50 years after their trauma. Shop around for a therapist you like and trust. There are proven therapy techniques out there and medications that can banish nightmares and soothe other symptoms. With a skilled professional, some courage, and some hard work, your latest anniversary reaction could be your last.