

One Year After. . .

Coping with the Anniversary Effect

The Effects of Trauma

A traumatic event such as a natural disaster, accident, death, or assault, especially a sudden one, makes us feel vulnerable. Understanding the impact of the experience is a major part of coping with the trauma. People who experience a traumatic event experience any number of symptoms as the body and psyche begin to cope with the impact and meaning of the event. These symptoms can include any of the following: denial, shock, numbness, feeling vulnerable and unsafe, anxiety, panic, increased worry, loss of concentration, withdrawal, flashbacks, headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbance, sadness, tearfulness, anger, appetite change, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness and hypervigilance.

If symptoms persist or feel overwhelming for more than a month, it is important to seek professional help. For many, as time goes on and with the support of friends and family, these symptoms gradually subside. Nevertheless, after a traumatic event, you might find yourself thinking about life in a new way or find that your priorities are different.

What is the Anniversary Effect?

Our body and mind have a way of marking time often without our conscious awareness. There is a rhythm to the seasons, the amount of light in the day, the temperature and the associated flow of sounds and activity. Your own activities and schedule may vary by the season. As the calendar and natural cycles come around to the anniversary of a traumatic event, a whole set of automatic and unconscious physiological and emotional triggers become activated. If you were assaulted one night in October, the feel of a heavy sweater and the cool night air may trigger discomfort and panic. If a parent died in early June, the fresh spring smells and chirping birds may prompt a melancholic reaction.

The moments you remember most vividly are usually times that were filled with emotional meaning and intensity. Traumatic events are emotionally intense and the anniversary of the event can trigger the same rush of adrenaline your body activated to cope with the trauma. One year after a traumatic event you may experience some of the same symptoms you first experienced including: an increase in depression, anxiety, loss of concentration, poor appetite, sleeplessness and a fear of being out of control or vulnerable.

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The Anniversary Effect is a common and normal response. You may experience some symptoms for many months or years after a traumatic event to some degree. Many people rethink their lives and their priorities after a traumatic event and make some fundamental life changes that reflect a change in their values. A one-year anniversary is a marker that allows you to measure your progress. An anniversary is a time to look back one year and notice the changes you made, how you have processed the events and how you have healed.

Since some resurgence of symptoms is not unusual there are a number of things you can do for yourself as you approach the first anniversary of a traumatic event.

What You Can Do:

- Plan ahead
- Keep rested, eat well and exercise
- Talk about your memories or how you are feeling
- Use humor
- You may want to be alone or do something special
- Find a creative outlet
- Make the day special
- Turn to family and friends for support and comfort.
- Take extra care of yourself

Seeking Professional Assistance

If your symptoms persist or worsen, you should seek professional help. The University of Virginia Faculty and Employee Assistance Program Staff is available to consult with any employee or family member wanting to better cope with a trauma or struggling in the aftermath of a crisis. ***Please call***

434-243-2643 to set up a free, confidential appointment with an EAP counselor or for further information.