

Grief: Coping with reminders after a loss

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When a loved one dies, you often don't experience the grief of loss just once. You're likely to relive your grief on the anniversary of your loved one's death and on special days throughout the year, such as a birthday or religious holiday. Even memorial celebrations for strangers who died in catastrophes, conflicts or disasters can trigger the familiar pain and sadness of a loss.

The return of these feelings of grief is not necessarily a setback in the grieving process.

It's a reflection that the lives of others were important to you, and that you grieve their loss. Learning more about what to expect and how to cope with reminders of your loss can help make the grieving process a healthy, healing one.

When grief returns

The memories and emotions rekindled through reminders are called anniversary reactions. These reactions, which can last for days or weeks at a time, often give rise to a host of emotions and physical problems.

You may experience sadness, loneliness, anger, anxiety, nightmares and lack of interest in activities, just as you did when you first grieved. You may weep unexpectedly or replay images or scenes related to your loved one. You might have trouble eating or sleeping, or develop headaches, stomach pain or intestinal upset.

Anniversary reactions can also evoke powerful emotional memories - experiences in which you vividly recall the feelings and events surrounding the death. You might remember in great detail where you were and what you were doing, for instance. Common triggers of grief

Some reminders are almost inevitable, especially during the first year after a death. That's when you'll face a lot of "firsts" - the first holiday after your sister died, for example. The first Mother's Day after losing your mom. The first anniversary of a national tragedy. Your reactions to these firsts might be intense, but you'll probably find it easier to cope with subsequent anniversary dates as years pass.

Common reminders that may trigger your grief also include:

- Weddings and wedding anniversaries
- Family gatherings or celebrations

- Childhood milestones, including the first day of school, prom, homecoming and other child-oriented days, such as Halloween
- Special days - when you met, when you became engaged, when you last saw your loved one alive, when you took a big trip together, for example

Reminders aren't just tied to the calendar, though. They can be anywhere - in sights, sounds and smells, in the news or on television programs. And they can ambush you, suddenly flooding you with emotions when you drive by the restaurant your wife loved or when you hear a song your friend liked so much.

Even years after a loss you may continue to feel sadness and pain when you're confronted with such reminders. Although some people think grieving should last a year or less, grieve at your own pace.

When grief becomes depression or PTSD

On the other hand, protracted or intense grief can be unhealthy. If you find that your feelings interfere with your ability to function in your daily life - you miss work deadlines, have conflicts with family or friends, neglect your appearance or stop socializing, for instance - you may no longer be simply grieving. Your grief may have progressed into depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Depression

Symptoms of depression include self-criticism, feelings of guilt about the loss and even thoughts of suicide. If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, it's time to get treatment. Start by visiting your primary care doctor to discuss treatment options, such as psychotherapy or medication.

PTSD

In some cases, anniversary reactions can trigger PTSD. This is more likely to occur when you have recurrent distressful memories of something that happened to you personally, such as a mugging or a car accident. Signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress include fear and anxiety, a lack of focus, sadness, changes in sleeping or eating habits, bouts of crying, or recurrent thoughts or nightmares about the event. If you have these disturbing feelings for more than a month, if they're severe or if you feel you're having trouble coping, see your doctor or a mental health professional. Prepare for episodes of grief



Be prepared for the occasional return of feelings of grief. Knowing that you're likely to experience anniversary reactions can help you understand them and even turn them into opportunities for healing. Some people create new holiday traditions or ways of honoring loved ones who have died. You may find that symbolizing or expressing grief helps you cope better than denying or avoiding it.

Attending public memorials and ceremonies that mark the anniversary of tragedies, disasters and other events that claimed lives also can help. These kinds of ceremonies can help draw people together and allow you to share feelings with others who feel similarly.

You might find yourself dreading upcoming special days, fearful of being overwhelmed by painful memories and emotions. In some cases, the anticipation can be worse than the reality. In fact, you may find that you work through some of your grief as you cope with the stress and anxiety of approaching reminders.

Tips to cope and heal

Here are several ways to cope with reminders of loss and to continue the healing process:

- Be reassured that anniversary reactions are normal and that their intensity will diminish in time.
- Reminisce about your relationship with the person who died. Try to focus on the good things about the relationship and the time you had together, rather than the loss.
- Plan a distraction, such as a weekend away or a visit with friends or relatives.
- Start a new tradition in your loved one's memory. For example, make a donation to a charitable organization in the person's name on birthdays or holidays.
- If you find yourself becoming more anxious, sad or distressed by news coverage, limit your exposure to news reports about tragic events.
- Draw family members and friends close to you, rather than avoiding them. Find someone who will encourage you to talk about your loss. Stay connected to your usual support systems, such as spiritual leaders and social groups.
- Allow yourself to feel sadness and a sense of loss. Conversely, allow yourself to also experience joy and happiness as you celebrate special times. In fact, you might find yourself both laughing and crying.

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