

Anniversary Reactions: A Survivor's Guide on How to Cope

by Angie Panos, Ph.D.

What is an "Anniversary Reaction?"

Anniversary reactions are a re-triggering or re-experiencing of a traumatic event that occurs because of a time cue. A time cue can be anything that was associated with the time that the trauma occurred, from the season of the year, to a particular day, date or hour. While "anniversary reactions" relate to a specific time, other cues can cause a person a re-triggering or re-experiencing, such as disturbing news reports about trauma. The following information describes anniversary reactions and is specifically for you, the survivor, as a helpful guide to understand how to cope.

A Survivor's Story

What is so frustrating for survivors of trauma, is that an "anniversary reaction" can occur even if they are not consciously aware of the current date, day or time. A survivor called Ashley*, shared her story of an anniversary reaction:

My father and I went to the market every Saturday morning. We would joyfully share this time of being with each other, talking and shopping. But then my whole life stopped. My father was shot and killed by a stray bullet when some gang members came in to rob the store we were in. I was only 14. My whole life changed for the worse.

"It has been five years now and I am 19. Still on Saturday mornings, even when I am not paying attention to what day it is, I feel an unease inside. Often I begin to have thoughts of missing my father and feeling sad. Then I think to myself, 'What day is this?' and sure enough it is Saturday. I have been to several therapists who have told me that my grieving is 'incomplete' and once I adequately deal with the trauma and grief, these feelings will go away. But after five years and lots of therapy, it had gotten less intense, but the feelings had not gone away. I didn't give up though, I went to a couple more therapists and asked for a new approach."

There are several points in Ashley's story that are important for survivors to understand. Anniversary reactions can be persistent and troublesome. They can occur even when you are not aware of the time. Although Ashley was in therapy and trying to deal with her grief and trauma, it did not seem to alleviate this particular reaction. Ashley did not give up however, determined to find a way to cope with her feelings she went to a couple more therapists until she found a helpful approach. Ashley, now 20 years old, continues her story:

"My therapist asked me a lot of questions to help me express and understand my feelings. She asked me how I wanted to feel about Saturday mornings. I realized that I did not want to give up my special memories of the times my father and I had on Saturday mornings. I just didn't want to think of the trauma, the shooting, the blood and his death. I began doing things on Saturday mornings to honor his memory and change my feelings for Saturday mornings to a positive experience, like it was for so many years. It wasn't immediate, but little by little the positive experiences and feelings became stronger than thinking about the trauma. I was finally able to control my thoughts about it. Sometimes, although rarely, the images of that horrible day flash in my mind. I tell myself that I don't choose to think about it and distract myself to other activities. Some Saturdays I go out with my friends and don't even think about it. Other times I

look at old pictures and laugh about the many happy times my father and I shared. I can now choose how I want to spend the day.”

Ashley’s story reminds me of a line from Dr. Frank Ochberg’s Survivor Psalm: “I may never forget, but I need not always remember.” Ashley worked to establish a new meaning to the day, while honoring the positive memories of her father. She found a sense of peace, that allowed her for the first time to go out with friends and have fun on Saturdays.

Another Survivor’s Story

Some survivors report feeling especially frightened, or jittery at certain times or dates. Cliff* was run off a road late on a Friday night in November, as he headed home from his swing shift at a computer firm. He was pulled out of his car, robbed, car-jacked, beaten and knocked unconscious. The gang assumed he was dead and left him by the side of the road. A policeman found him and he was transported to a hospital. His doctors told him that the cold temperatures slowed down the damage to his brain. He would fully recover. While Cliff was grateful for the news, what he did not expect is the psychological symptoms that he would experience in the year to come. The weather change to cooler temperatures, the following November triggered an anniversary reaction for Cliff. He became so anxious that he began missing work. Even though he took a different route, he began feeling fearful of the drive home. Cliff felt crazy, because he thought he had dealt with the trauma. He had even quit seeing his therapist months before. Finally, his supervisor told him he could not miss any more work and he went back to his therapist for help.

Cliff’s story highlights how anniversary reactions can feel like a relapse into traumatic symptoms. Survivors sometimes wonder if they are ever going to feel better. There is hope and there are things that you can do to better cope with the feelings of an anniversary reaction.

Ways to Cope

- 1) Talk about your feelings with a professional trained to assist people with grief and trauma.
- 2) Respect your needs. Do you need a healing ritual to acknowledge your trauma, or do you need to rely on friends or family to distract you from thought of the event? Remember there is no right or wrong approach.
- 3) Build new memories and meanings for the time frame. Although it takes time to heal, you will eventually get to choose which memories you wish to savor and those you wish to “not constantly remember.”
- 4) Take good care of yourself. Anxiety only gets worse if you are sleep-deprived, hungry or dehydrated. Exercise helps soothe your nervous system. Good self-care is not selfish, it is very important.
- 5) Talk to your significant others-friends and family who care about you- about your feelings. Following are some helpful hints for them. Give this article to them to read and then discuss it with them. People do care, although they may not say or do things just right. Be forgiving of them, and let them know you appreciate their efforts to support you.

How Families and Friends Can Help

Honoring the survivor’s needs is important. Don’t tell them to get over it. Don’t tell them that they should be over it. Instead ask them what you can do to make it easier for them. Ask them if they need to acknowledge the day with some type of healing ritual? Or would it help them for you to plan something fun together, to keep them distracted from their suffering?

Please understand that there is no right or wrong time-frame or approach to the healing process. They may need time alone, or they may need you to really be there for them, listening and caring. You can make a difference, so don't be discouraged. It takes lots of time to heal from a traumatic event, but healing is possible. Don't give up on the survivor, they need you. Professional help and the support of friends and family is key to the healing process.

Additional Helpful Resources:

Website:

www.aarp.org (grief and loss section)

Books:

Good Grief: A Constructive Approach to the Problem of Loss by Granger E. Westberg
Awakening from Grief: Finding the Road Back to Joy by John E. Welshons

*Name changed to protect survivor's identity.

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