



## THE ANNIVERSARY EFFECT – RECOGNIZING & MANAGING

Excerpted from *The ‘Anniversary Effect’: Processing the Pain Year after Year*, by Dr. Rachele Zemlok.

**Anniversary Effect** - an unexpected reaction to an anniversary of a major loss or traumatic event.

Reactions to traumatic events from the past happen because we are reminded of them. Reminders can be direct, like when someone mentions what happened or the day the event occurred, or they can be more subliminal, like messages about the event from the media or social media. Your brain gathers information on the place, sounds, smells, time of year, and feelings to file away for the future so you can avoid this danger or stress from happening again. This means that many triggers can start to signal our brain to be on high alert.

Around the time of year of a traumatic anniversary, individuals may find themselves with additional feelings:

- Restlessness or sleep issues
- Fear, Anxiety, Panic attacks
- Sadness, Feelings of grief
- Anger, Irritability
- Physical symptoms (fatigue, pain, headaches, digestive problems, etc.)

### GUIDANCE FOR NAVIGATING PERSONAL REACTIONS

1. **Do Not Let Unhealthy Habits Spiral During This Time of Year.** Actively avoid giving yourself a pass on negative coping behaviors simply because you are not feeling your best or grieving (e.g., drinking, spending money, sleeping, and detaching from others). The best way to support yourself is to invest in more positive coping skills and self-care than you do regularly. Some examples of healthy coping skills that promote resilience and healing:
  - **Physical Activity:** This positively impacts us, especially in times of distress.
  - **Good Nutrition and Hydration:** Keep your brain and body fueled as it navigates these difficult moments.
  - **Time with Family and Friends:** Try to spend more time with supportive people.
  - **Make Time for Your Favorite Hobbies:** distractions with enjoyable activities can be a healthy way to cope.
  - **Talk About It:** Even when hard, people usually feel better after acknowledging painful memories.
2. **Let Go of Judgment.** There is no right or wrong way to go through an event and recover from it. Comparing yourself to others or their reactions is unhelpful, even when your coworkers were on the same call. Just because the person next to you is not showing outward signs of distress doesn't mean they are not going through something similar. We are all good at putting on a show when needed, and firefighters and EMTs are especially good at managing emotional reactions at work. Having a response to a traumatic anniversary does not change your strength, resilience, emotional stability, or ability to be a good responder. It mostly means you are human.
3. **Set Healthy Boundaries with Information About the Event.** A healthy boundary is one that is intentional and where you have considered what will be most beneficial for you. With national tragedies, there can be a lot of news coverage and media representing very emotional aspects of the event. Limit your exposure. Find other activities that support your well-being. Be present with your thoughts and reactions, not the rest of the world's.
4. **Do Not Delay Care.** Therapy is not something you have to do for life or even a long time. A professional can help you navigate the more challenging periods in your life, even if for a brief period. Reach out to a professional if the symptoms you are experiencing make it hard for you to function in your daily life responsibilities, such as caring for yourself. Do not put off getting help if this is the case for you. Other signs you should reach out to a professional:
  - You engage in harmful behaviors or coping skills, such as unhealthy alcohol, cannabis, or substance use.

- You emotionally detach from loved ones.
- You exhibit poor decision-making or engage in risky behaviors.
- You experience thoughts of suicide.

## TIPS FOR AGENCIES AND PEER SUPPORT PERSONNEL

This is essential information to consider if your agency has experienced a significant traumatic event, even one close to your agency or a national event. Consider anniversaries of line-of-duty deaths, suicides, and local and national traumatic events that impacted your personnel and their families.

Be on the lookout for members who appear not themselves (e.g., zoning out, more irritable, quieter than usual, appearing very tired or stressed, unusual moods for their personality, disengaged) and to check in with them.

Encourage members to care for themselves, and send reminders about your agency's wellness resources, such as the contact information of the agency's Employee Assistance Program, during those potentially challenging times. When you know an upcoming anniversary that might be impactful to them, it's OK to ask people directly how they are doing. Be a listening ear to coworkers who want to talk about it. Let people know it is common to think about impactful events around their anniversaries and encourage them to seek professional help as necessary.

## TIPS FOR FAMILIES

1. **Talk About It.** Have open conversations with significant others about an anniversary that is on your mind and what you've noticed about yourself. There's nothing to "fix" here; it is just sharing information so your partner can better understand the inconsistencies they are picking up on. This is how you avoid unnecessary arguments that develop out of misunderstandings.
2. **Watch the Kids' Reactions.** Kids have less insight and verbal skills to articulate their experiences, but they pick up on more than we expect. Even if they do not know what happened, they can still sense stress within the household. Mostly be aware that any time children are trying to process emotional experiences that they cannot articulate, they might exhibit brief behavior challenges or regressions (e.g., a child no longer able to sleep alone, potty training regressions, a teen suddenly acting out). If this happens, you can:
  - Be honest and open when necessary and when age appropriate.
  - Provide a little more reassurance and understanding during the impacted timeframe.
  - Focus on positive and quality time together, and engage in positive activities for the entire family.
  - Prevent their exposure to sensitive material on the topic and monitor the input they are getting about the event (e.g., media, social media, discussions among family and friends).
  - Communicate with other adults and important caregivers in their life so everyone can be sensitive and supportive of their needs.
  - Model self-care and positive coping skills.
  - Initiate and prioritize structured routines.
3. Be sensitive to the fact that each family member will have different reactions and needs during anniversary periods. You may be determined to attend an event to honor those lost in a tragedy, but one of your kids or spouse might find this overwhelming and want to engage in self-care on that day. Adjust to individual needs and allow for different ways of addressing reactions to anniversaries.

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