

ANNIVERSARY EFFECT BEST PRACTICES

The Anniversary Effect is an unexpected reaction to an anniversary of a major loss or traumatic event. This bulletin is a guide for Fire & EMS leaders to help recognize and manage within their department.

Reactions to traumatic events from the past happen because responders 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.

First responders accumulate a career's worth of critical incidents: line-of-duty deaths (LODDs), pediatric fatalities, mass casualty incidents, suicides of colleagues, and catastrophic calls that never fully leave them. This means responders may carry multiple anniversary dates simultaneously, each capable of triggering a reaction. Leaders must understand that the anniversary effect is not a rare exception in fire and EMS. It is an expected reality of the profession.

Around the time of a traumatic anniversary, individuals may find themselves experiencing:

- Restlessness or sleep issues
- Fear, anxiety, or panic attacks
- Sadness or feelings of grief
- Anger or irritability
- Physical symptoms (fatigue, pain, headaches, digestive problems)
- Intrusive memories or flashbacks
- Emotional numbing or detachment
- Avoidance of people, places, or situations connected to the event
- Low motivation or disengagement from duties

Anniversary reactions can affect judgment, decision-making, situational awareness, and interpersonal communication, all of which are critical to safe fireground and EMS operations.

Leaders must understand that firefighters and EMTs are especially skilled at masking emotional reactions at work. A member may appear fine on the surface while struggling significantly beneath it. The absence of visible distress does not mean the member is not affected. Having a response to a traumatic anniversary does not change a person's strength, resilience, or ability to be a good responder; it means they are human.

Leaders set the tone for how trauma is acknowledged and addressed in their organizations. Research on fire service recovery following LODDs consistently shows that open communication, visible leadership presence, and proactive wellness support are the most critical factors in organizational healing. A leader who dismisses or ignores anniversary reactions, even unintentionally, sends the message that struggling is unacceptable. Conversely, a leader who acknowledges the anniversary, checks in with crew members, and normalizes help-seeking creates a culture of psychological safety.

The most effective tool a leader has is a genuine relationship with their crew. Leaders who regularly engage with their personnel, having informal conversations and sharing meals, are far more likely to notice when something is off. When an anniversary is approaching that may be impactful to a member, a powerful thing a leader can do is simply ask:

"Hey, I know this time of year can be tough — how are you doing?"

Research consistently shows that asking about mental health does not plant the idea of distress; it opens a door that the person may have been waiting for someone to open. Be a listening ear. You do not need to have answers or solutions — presence and acknowledgment are often what is needed most.

What Leaders Should Do — Proactive Strategies

Before the Anniversary

- **Anticipate and Plan.** If you know a significant anniversary is approaching, plan ahead. Brief your peer support team. Alert your EAP. Consider whether a brief acknowledgment at roll call or a station visit would be beneficial.
- **Communicate Wellness Resources.** Send a reminder to your personnel about available resources, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) contact information, peer support team contacts, department chaplain, and any mental health apps or hotlines your agency provides. Normalize their use.
- **Brief Company Officers and Supervisors.** Ensure your front-line supervisors are aware of the approaching anniversary and are watching for behavioral changes in their crews. They are your eyes and ears at the station level.
- **Coordinate with Peer Support.** If your agency has a peer support team, activate them around significant anniversaries. Peer supporters can make informal contact with members, provide a listening ear, and identify those who may need professional referrals.

On and Around the Anniversary

- **Acknowledge It.** Silence can feel like dismissal. A brief, sincere acknowledgment at roll call, during a station visit, or in a department communication that recognizes the significance of the date validates your personnel's experiences. You do not need to make it a major event; sometimes a quiet, personal acknowledgment is more powerful.
- **Be Visible.** Leaders who show up — physically present at stations, walking the floor, having coffee with crews — communicate that they care. This is especially important around difficult anniversaries. As one fire chief noted, the simple act of sitting down and listening to a firefighter can be the most meaningful leadership action of the year.
- **Create Space for Conversation.** You do not need to force a group discussion, but make it clear that conversation is welcome. Let members know it is common and normal to think about impactful events around their anniversaries.
- **Monitor for Operational Safety.** Be attentive to whether any member's distress level may be affecting their ability to safely perform their duties. This is not about unnecessarily removing people from service. It is about ensuring that those who are struggling have access to support before a safety issue develops.

After the Anniversary

- **Follow Up.** Check in with members who appeared to be struggling. A brief follow-up, "How are you doing this week?" demonstrates that your concern was genuine and not just a one-time gesture.
- **Document and Learn.** Note what worked and what didn't in your approach. Over time, your agency can build a more systematic approach to anniversary support.

When to Escalate

Peer supporters and supervisors should refer a member to professional mental health care when:

- Symptoms persist beyond two weeks following an anniversary
- The member expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- The member is engaging in harmful coping behaviors (substance use, reckless behavior)
- The member's functioning at work or home is significantly impaired

If a member expresses thoughts of suicide, do not leave them alone. Contact your EAP, a mental health crisis line, or emergency services immediately. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) is available 24/7 and has resources specifically for first responders.