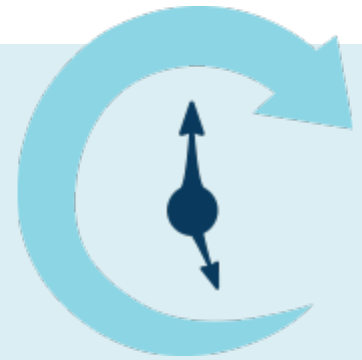




Planning How to Cope

with Commemorations, Special Events, and Timeframes that Activate Trauma Memories



What Survivors Tell Us Can Help

As you approach the first year after a traumatic event (an incident that threatened your life, health, or safety, or that of a loved one), it is very common for survivors to re-experience distressing reactions, similar to those you felt during the original event. For some, these reactions can feel as strong as they did when the event occurred.

Because of the passage of time and the reactions not feeling as intense, many people do not associate their retraumatization responses with their original trauma. During retraumatization, the memories associated with the trauma are reawakened. You may feel confused and afraid that something is wrong, but you are not sure why.

Survivors report re-experiencing many of the initial negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors they experienced during the trauma, even long after the event is over. People who experienced interpersonal trauma may feel the effects of retraumatization more intensely. If you are re-experiencing negative thoughts, feelings, or behaviors from a traumatic event, the trauma may be having a lasting effect on you, and you may benefit from speaking with a trauma-informed psychologist, social worker, or other mental health provider (see the *Helpful Resources* section at the end of this tip sheet for related information).

This tip sheet describes the signs and risk factors for managing commemorative events, holidays, and other special timeframes that may bring distressing memories and reactions from a traumatic event.

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*Many survivors of a mass violence event describe the first year after as the “year of firsts.” It is the first time they are celebrating the holidays or a birthday without their loved one who died in the event, or their neighbors who were killed, or since their lives were changed by the injury they sustained. The anniversary may be the first time they stop to take stock of where their lives are now. Survivors who have gone through this have some suggestions for getting through this year of firsts. **Try using some of the tips suggested here to see what may help, and know that getting past the first year after a traumatic event usually brings a bit of relief.***

Common Signs of Distress

Just about everyone who experiences a trauma will re-experience it in some way at commemoration events and at other timeframes that are significant, such as the birthday of a loved one who was killed, or during holiday times when the presence of family members may be sorely missed.

Negative reactions are often seen in the following categories:

1. Negative thoughts and actions that are associated with fear or other emotions experienced during the traumatic event, such as having a rapid heartbeat when reminded of the event or acting sad, fearful, anxious, and nervous, even in safe spaces.
2. Physical symptoms, such as sleep problems, significant changes in weight, physical pain for no apparent reason, and tiredness or lack of energy.
3. Social withdrawal, isolation, and avoidance, or an excessive feeling of neediness. For some people, these feelings may result in substance misuse as a negative coping mechanism to help with social engagement or to help forget about the trauma.
4. Spiritual disconnection, or a change in your relationship with your faith, such as difficulty understanding how traumatic events can happen and having difficulty making meaning of the event; or feeling a loss of connection to a higher power and less relief from prayers and other spiritual activities that were previously effective in reducing your stress. Some people may turn to a spiritual practice or religion to help them cope.
5. Emotional symptoms, such as not being able to control your emotions while in public, not being able to calm yourself down, and having a decreased sense of security and inability to feel joy or love.



Photo: Matt Gentry from the Roanoke Times and reprinted by The Roper Center ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/shootings-guns-and-public-opinion-blog



Photo: April Naturale, Ph.D.

Can't I just wing it and see how I feel? Why Planning is Important

During commemorative events and other special timeframes, and when hearing news stories of similar incidents of mass violence, like shooting events, bombings, and destructive disasters, and sometimes even experiences that seem unrelated, survivors can experience distress. These “activating” events are like aftershocks of an earthquake and can be very disruptive for some people.

Plan activities. For these reasons, it is highly recommended that survivors plan how they will spend commemorative timeframes, birthdays, and other potentially difficult times. It is likely to be more helpful to plan what you are going to do (and with whom) before the special date arrives. Plan your activities so that you know what to anticipate and are not disappointed if something you wanted to do is not possible because you didn't reserve the place or invite the person you wanted to be with ahead of time. Don't set yourself up for disappointment.

Reach out to family and friends. There is no need to be alone, and isolation is not helpful. Being with others who understand and accept how you feel is one of the best ways to get through a difficult timeframe—even if you just take a walk with someone who “gets” you. Invite or accept invitations to participate in rituals, social events, or even just to be in the company of others. Sharing a meal together, or attending a memorial ceremony, or honoring the memory of someone who died through a ritual—like lighting a candle and looking at pictures—can help relieve grief and other distressing emotions.

Do talk about your losses. Most people have a need to talk about their losses. This is normal and may continue beyond the anniversary and special days. Find someone who will listen and understand.

Coping Activities

On a positive note, the commemoration of a traumatic event can provide an opportunity for emotional healing. Individuals can make significant progress in working through the natural grieving process by recognizing, acknowledging, and paying attention to the feelings and issues that surface during their anniversary reaction. These feelings and issues can help individuals develop perspective on the event and figure out where it fits in their hearts, minds, and lives. Here are a few suggestions on coping well:

- **Be aware that special days may be difficult.** This is normal and recognizing it as such may help you to not feel like there is something wrong with you and not be so hard on yourself. It's normal to have fears and concerns about how the special day will make you feel. So, be gentle with yourself, treat yourself with the same kindness you give to others.
- **Participate in rituals that may provide soothing comfort.** Whatever those rituals are—singing, praying, going to the beach or a movie, sharing a meal, or going to a spiritual service—they can be comforting.
- **Know that it is natural to feel sad and/or angry.** You may feel bitter and angry that others seem to be enjoying themselves when you are having a difficult time. Good wishes and holiday greetings may just remind you of your losses. This is a normal reaction. Try not to fight the feelings but be aware they are likely connected to your losses and may not be aimed at anyone in particular.
- **Draw on your faith and spirituality.** For many, faith is a source of strength and comfort every day, and even more so during difficult times. Reach out to your faith advisor and your spiritual community to support and console you.
- **Accept kindness and help from others.** Support makes difficult times more bearable. There is often a tendency to resist help from others, or to believe that we don't need help as much as our neighbor, and therefore, we shouldn't accept any. We don't want to burden others, and we value our independence. This is common in many cultures and ethnicities across the country and around the world. Difficult times, like commemorative timeframes, birthdays, and holidays, may be very important times to open up and let others in. Accept their support. Be gracious and allow them the opportunity to share their caring with you.
- **Helping others may actually be a form of helping yourself.** If you are the type of person who gets satisfaction from helping others, you might want to think of small ways that you can be of help to others in need during difficult times. Helping can be as simple as sending a text or even a letter with encouraging messages, serving meals at a soup kitchen or donating gift cards so survivors and response agencies can purchase the things most needed.

Helpful Resources

Mental Health Information

MentalHealth.gov

Website: [mentalhealth.gov](https://www.mentalhealth.gov)

MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. Government information and resources on mental health.

National Center for Trauma-Informed Care

Toll free: 1-866-254-4819

Website: [samhsa.gov/nctic](https://www.samhsa.gov/nctic)

Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator

Toll free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)

TDD: 1-866-889-2647

Website: [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](https://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov)

MHTreatmentLocator

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

Toll free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)

(24/7 English and español)

TDD: 1-800-487-4889

Website: [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](https://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov)

Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)

Website: [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov), this resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.

Disaster Distress Helpline

Toll free: 1-800-985-5990, a 24/7 toll free, multilingual, and confidential crisis support service for residents in the United States and its territories. Text: **TalkWithUs to 66746** to connect with a trained crisis counselor.