

Anniversary Reactions

Generally we think of anniversaries as good things. They are times to remember and celebrate cherished events such as births, graduations, weddings, the start of a business or a career, or even the birth of a nation. However, other less pleasant events also have anniversaries. We remember these as well, but we don't usually celebrate them. However, we may have some ritual that we observe to acknowledge the day, for example, taking flowers to the grave of a loved one.

An anniversary reaction is a very different thing. It is an unpleasant emotional response to a certain day or time of year. It is caused by one or more specific traumatic events having happened at that time of year at some point in the past. Or it can also be caused by a traumatic event or events being associated with a certain date or time of year. There are a number of different types of anniversary reactions. We could have a reaction to the date of birth or death of someone associated with some form of trauma that we suffered. We could have a reaction to the date or time of year when we lost someone important to us through death, divorce, incarceration or abandonment.

Anniversary reactions can be to an event that only occurred once or they can be to a pattern of events that occurred repeatedly at a certain time of year. An example of this would be reactivity to Christmas due to dysfunctional and destructive behaviors of one or more family members that tended to occur ever year at Christmas time such as a violent and reactive father tearing up the Christmas tree. Obviously events such as this are very likely to cause anniversary reactions.

An anniversary reaction can also occur not because of something that happened but because of something that didn't happen. An example of this might be reacting to one's own birthday due to the fact that one's family didn't celebrate it or because they only celebrated it nominally. The lack of enthusiasm for the celebration only served to underscore a pervasive pattern of rejection or neglect. That day of all the days of the year stood as a stark reminder of what was missing as far as love, nurturing, caring, or feeling like a wanted child.

Anniversary reactions can range from mild to severe and may occur at any time after the event. If the survivor doesn't recognize this as one of the symptoms of PTSD, he or she may feel like Scrooge instead of like a normal human being who went through a very abnormal and bad experience at a certain time of the year. Family and friends may react to a survivor of childhood trauma's Scrooge-like behavior in an unsympathetic manner, which only adds to one's own sense of being bad or wrong and to one's feeling of isolation.

Anniversary reactions tend to be the sort of triggers that sneak up on us. At first and maybe for many years we have them and don't realize what's happening. Perhaps we attribute our reactive state to some current event or events. There are usually plenty of day-to-day stressors that we can scapegoat in this way. Eventually as the pattern repeats

over and over again we figure out that we are having an anniversary reaction. But very often we forget from one year to the next that a certain time of year is difficult for us. Or we think that because we figured this out last year that it won't be a problem for us this year.

Anniversary reactions tend to cause us to behave in ways that we regret and that make us feel discouraged about ourselves and about our progress in overcoming our PTSD. Because we are already triggered, we tend to be more reactive to other things to which we might otherwise not react. This may tend to make us feel like we are losing ground.

Anniversary reactions tend to compound themselves over the years. Because they tend to make us behave in ways that are counter-productive, we tend to do things that bring upon us new traumas. For example our reactivity may cause us to behave in a way that alienates a friend. The loss of that friendship then becomes an additional trauma that is associated with that time of year.

Like so many PTSD symptoms, anniversary reactions tend to not go away. And as with so many PTSD symptoms, the best we can hope for is to get better and better at managing our symptoms. We would probably be wise to mark our calendars a year in advance to remind us to be aware and prepare. This could be done in a playful way with a statement in our calendar a few days in advance such as "rough road ahead".

Our preparation might include one or more of the numerous coping strategies that we are learning to help us cope with our PTSD. We could change the scene, for example by planning to be out of town maybe on vacation at that time or by planning an all-consuming volunteer activity for that time. We could line up a support person to help monitor how we are doing and help keep us on track. We could take up a new activity or hobby, learn a new skill or reinvest ourselves in improving on a skill we already have. We could even choose to reengage in therapy or start a new course of therapy to help us weather these difficult times.

As always, we need to keep processing our experiences of the past. We can do this in therapy, we can do this by meditating on the events of the past, we can do this by journaling, we can do this by reading self-help books and we can do this by talking with a trusted friend about it. Ultimately we probably get farther when we are able to reconnect with the emotions that we had during the trauma.

For many of us reconnecting with the emotional content of the trauma is very difficult. We had gotten very good at repressing our emotions as a way of getting through a traumatic time. We got so good in fact that it is now very difficult for us to reconnect with them at all. We repressed them because they were so enormously uncomfortable and because we didn't get the responses that we wanted from those around us. But because we repressed them we never got to finish processing them. Thus they remain buried within us as unfinished business. As long as these emotions remain unprocessed, our anniversary reactions will continue to plague us.

The challenge and the solution is to face the painful experiences that we have had in the past and make our peace with them. Time heals all wounds, but only if we use that time wisely. Hiding from our experiences and the feelings associated with them is tempting.

However, at least once a year on the anniversaries of traumatic events we will re-experience them in some way unless we do the processing that is necessary to overcome, in so far as we are able, the impact that those experiences had on us. Anniversary reactions are reminders that we still have work to do and we would do well to respond by addressing our unfinished business.

Desired Outcome: Gain a better understanding of how a specific time of year may be a trigger for us and begin to look for ways to diminish these anniversary reactions.

Discussion Starters: What anniversary reactions am I aware of having? Was there a time when I was having this reaction and didn't know it? Do I have any anniversary reactions that are due to a specific single traumatic event? Do I have any that are due to recurring yearly traumatic situations? To what extent am I able to reconnect to the emotions I had when the trauma occurred? What strategies have I used to cope with anniversary reactions? What has worked and what has not worked? What new strategies can I try?