



Building a Healthy Boston

Coping During Disaster Anniversaries & Trigger Events

From the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
US Department of Health and Human Services

For survivors, loved ones of victims and others who experience disasters, anniversary dates of the event, holidays, birthdays and other special occasions ('trigger events') may be met with joy and new reasons to celebrate, even after a tragedy.

These times, however, can also be difficult to face and when they are, renewed distress symptoms can appear, almost as strongly as right after the disaster. *It's not unusual for this to happen.* When you or someone you care about feels emotional distress in the days leading up to and during a disaster anniversary or other 'trigger event', try these tips for coping, and remember that you are not alone!

What are symptoms of distress?

Symptoms of disaster-related distress can vary person-to-person, and may be related to other life events like a divorce, unemployment, etc. Regardless of how or when symptoms appear, if you or someone you care about (including children and teens) has experienced a disaster recently or at any time in the past, it's important to learn the warning signs so you know how to help yourself or others cope and get help. Learn about the symptoms of distress in our handouts: *After a Disaster: Self-Care Tips for Dealing with Stress* and *Dealing with Children's Fears During and After a Crisis*.

Tips for Coping during Holidays, Anniversaries and Trigger Events

1. Be Aware that Special Days May Be Difficult

It's pretty common for some stress and other emotional responses to come back around anniversary time. Recognizing this may help you to realize that you are not 'crazy'. So try not be so hard on yourself! For many people, holidays, anniversaries and special days remind them of their losses. You may start anticipating the holidays or anniversary or birthday for several days, weeks for even months before: not having your loved one to share the day....not having your old home or apartment...not having your old neighborhood, your job....it is difficult to imagine that this has happened and hard to believe this is the current reality. *It's normal to have fears and concerns about how the holiday, anniversary or special day will make you feel.*

2. Be Gentle with Yourself

Be gentle with yourself during anniversary events after a disaster. These include not only the anniversary of the disaster itself, but other dates that are related, such as holidays, birthdays, wedding anniversaries, etc. Treat yourself on these days with the same kindness you give to others.

3. Participate in Rituals that May Provide Soothing Comfort

Whatever those rituals are: singing, praying, going to the beach or a movie, sharing a meal, going to a spiritual service. Some may choose to engage in rituals alone as an opportunity for quiet solitude and reflection; others may want to join with neighbors, friends and family to find strength and comfort in coming together: try both approaches!

4. Talk about Your Losses if You Need To

Most people have a need to talk about their losses and how their lives have changed since the disaster. This is normal and may continue beyond the holiday, anniversary and special days. Find someone who will listen and understand. And if you prefer to think and talk about the future rather than what's happened in the past, then that is what you should do. There is no need to talk about distressing events unless YOU want to.

5. Do Things that Might Help You with Complex Emotions

There is no one way that survivors, loved ones of victims, or first responders, rescue and recovery workers who worked or volunteered after the disaster are 'supposed' to feel during a holiday, anniversary or other special days. For some, they may say that they 'don't feel anything' which in and of itself *is* a feeling! *"Everyone's acting as if I'm supposed to cry or be sad today, but I don't feel any of those things."* Others may in fact cry or feel sad, and still others may feel angry, irritable, confused or uncertain of exactly what they are thinking or feeling.

Regardless of *what* you are feeling, it's important to be aware of *how* you are feeling and to engage in activities that will help you during the day:

- If you are the type of person who likes to exercise or even simply take a walk, make sure to do so in the days before and during the holiday or special days
- Try writing in a notebook as if you are telling someone a story or just write your thoughts down; maybe write a letter to your loved one or even yourself telling them you miss them or even just telling them how you are doing
- Talk to others you trust to understand whatever thoughts and feelings you're having.

6. Do What You Would Like to Do Rather Than What You Think You Should Do

Loss is likely to change the way you spend your holidays and other special days. While there may be a desire to keep things the same, trying to do so may make the losses more evident and distressing. Things *are* different. Know that you can create new ways to acknowledge and celebrate special days. Don't feel like you have to try to make things look or feel exactly the same as they were before. Most especially, try not to put the needs of others before your own needs on anniversaries, holidays and other special days. Each person should spend these days in the ways that will be most helpful to themselves. Trying to make things better for others may result in misunderstandings ("I thought that's what they wanted to do; they thought it was what I wanted to do; no one felt comfortable saying what they REALLY wanted to do," etc.) and may not allow for the best self-care.

7. 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 pleasant 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.

8. Draw on Your Faith/Spirituality

For many, faith and other spiritual beliefs are a source of strength and comfort every day, and most especially during difficult times. Reach out to your faith advisor, spiritual community, or anyone that you feel comfortable talking with about your beliefs to support and console you.

9. 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 shouldn't accept any. We often don't want to burden others and so many of us value our independence. This is common in many, many cultures and ethnicities across the country and around the world. Difficult times like holidays, anniversaries and birthdays 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.

10. Helping Others May Actually Help 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 going through your closet to find gently used clothing that might be of use to someone else.