

Grief, anniversaries and significant events

When we are bereaved the calendar of our life is altered forever. It becomes divided into the time before and after the death. We may find that there will be certain times that may trigger a grief response. This response sometimes called an 'anniversary reaction' does not mean that you are not coping with your grief; it is simply a reflection of your feelings for the deceased.

Reminders

It is normal to feel a heightened sense of grief when you are reminded of your loss. Reminders of the deceased are inevitable, such as a visit to the grave, the anniversary of the death, holidays, birthdays and any other events that connect you to the deceased. Sometimes attending a funeral or memorial for others may trigger the pain of your loss. Reminders can also be linked to your senses, sights, sounds and smells, such as hearing the deceased's favourite song on the car radio.

Reminders

Even years after a death, you may continue to feel sadness when you are reminded of the death. Grief can be unpredictable, and these reactions may last for a day or longer. During this time, you may experience the same intense responses as when you were first bereaved, such as:

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| » Anger | » Guilt |
| » Anxiety | » Loneliness |
| » Crying | » Pain |
| » Depression | » Sadness |
| » Fatigue, or lack of energy | » Trouble sleeping |

Planning

It is important to do some planning in the lead up to significant events and anniversaries. Plan what you want to do and don't want to do during this time. Planning can give you a greater sense of control, and that may help ease some of the anxiety and concern you may feel.

Be open to changing your mind depending on how you feel on the day. You may like to talk about the deceased in general conversation or commemorate special events like their birthday. Having an ongoing emotional connection with the deceased is a healthy and normal response. You may prefer to keep your memories to yourself and grieve privately, and that is okay too.

Occasions such as a birthday and Christmas often come with established traditions and rituals. There are no right or wrong answers as to what you should or should not do on these occasions. Some people like to continue these traditions. However, it is okay to change them if you want. Your 'normal' has changed and you may prefer to start some new practices and traditions. If you decide to cancel your usual activities for the day, try and have something else planned, to avoid feeling lonely and isolated. Whatever you choose for this year can always be changed next year.

Share your plan with family and friends

Once you have decided what you would like to do on the day, tell people what you might find helpful. Sometimes concerned family or friends may be unsure about how to help, encourage them to let you grieve in your own way and in your own time.

If you are planning to attend an event, have an exit strategy, you could let the organiser know that on the day you are unsure how you will feel and may need to leave early. Keep in mind it may be easier to leave someone else's home than it is to ask guests to leave your home.

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Taking care of yourself

It is important to take good care of yourself physically and emotionally in the lead up to and during significant events. Try and eat healthy food, get plenty of rest and listen to your emotions. Happiness and sadness can co-exist, so if you feel the need to cry that's okay, if you want to laugh that's okay too. There may be people that you choose to avoid at these times, particularly those who are unable to provide support.

Anniversary reactions are normal. Knowing that you're likely to experience anniversary reactions can help you understand them and even turn them into opportunities for healing.

Look at your diary or calendar and make a note of events and milestones that might be difficult for you. Start thinking about what you can do during these times to look after yourself.

- » Try and spend time with people who are supportive of you.
- » Decide how you want to spend the day and let family and friends know.
- » You might want to write a journal, making a note of what worked and what did not.
- » Give yourself permission to not be okay, free yourself from expectations.
- » Consider expressing your feelings in a creative way, such as artwork, writing or listening to music.
- » Connect with others, if it feels right, share your memories.
- » Stay connected to your usual support systems.
- » Consider doing something you would not usually do in memory of the deceased; make a donation in their name, plant a tree or perhaps do some volunteer work.
- » Do something that makes you feel good. It may be as simple as reading a magazine, going for a walk, listening to music, fishing, getting a massage or enjoying a cup of coffee at your favourite cafe.
- » Take it slow and easy, rest if you feel tired, try not to over-commit yourself.
- » Choosing how to sign cards and whose name to include can be difficult. Give yourself permission not to send cards if that feels too confronting.

When to seek further help?

Although grief can be very painful, most people find that with the support of family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to live with the loss, and may not need to seek professional help.

However, sometimes the circumstances of the death are very distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death that may make the grief chronic or prolonged. If you are finding it difficult to manage your day to day life, it is important to seek further help, such as attending a bereavement support group, contacting a bereavement counsellor, your general practitioner or a mental health professional.

Download the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's *MyGrief App* for immediate information about how to receive bereavement support or how to support someone who is grieving. The *MyGrief App* is available at <http://bit.ly/mygrief> for both the Apple and Android smartphone platforms.

Contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on freecall 1800 642 066 to arrange to speak with a specialist bereavement counsellor about telephone or online bereavement counselling.