Anniversary Reactions to a Traumatic Event

Some individuals experience reactions to traumatic events near or around the anniversary of those traumatic events. Knowing the common reactions one might expect is helpful so that you are not surprised by your feelings, behaviors and thoughts but rather you understand why you might be having them. Although anniversary reactions can be upsetting, it is helpful to know that recovery takes time and requires rebuilding on many levels – physically, emotionally and spiritually. With patience, understanding and support from family, friends and community members, individuals can emerge from trauma and disaster stronger than before.

Some of the common anniversary reactions/behaviors often seen for those who have experienced a disaster or traumatic event are:

- Repeated memories, thoughts and feelings about the event which are difficult to “turn off” and can make you feel as if you are reliving the event
- Grief and sadness related to losses that resulted from the event (i.e., deaths, loss of sense of complete safety, vulnerability to danger)
- Resurfacing fear and anxiety which results in jumpiness, startle responses and hypervigilance; this may be especially strong for those still working through the grieving process
- Irritability, frustration and anger about the event and/or guilt about surviving the event
- Avoidance of reminders about the event in an effort to protect yourself from an anniversary reaction; education about anniversary reactions and how to cope with them can be helpful in alleviating stress/anxiety associated with this avoidance response.

Helpful Coping Responses

- Remembering and honoring the anniversary event through a private act, attendance at a public commemoration event or attendance at a worship service; such remembrance behaviors can be cleansing and healing
- Reflection upon what steps have been taken and what challenges have been overcome since the traumatic event; this can be a time to appreciate how far you and your community have come and to appreciate all those who have up to this point made the recovery process possible

If your response to an anniversary event persists in an ongoing way that disrupts your ability to carry out your daily life activities (i.e., sleep, eat, work or attend school, communicate and experience support in important relationships, concentrate), ask for help. For students at Suffolk University, the Counseling Center is available for support at 617-573-8226. An after-hours urgent call line is available year round at the same number, 617-573-8226. For faculty and staff, the Suffolk University EAP Program, LifeScope, can be contacted at 800-828-6025.

Adapted from information from the National Mental Health Office, October 2002.

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