



Tips for Families on Anticipating Anniversary Reactions to Traumatic Events

Whenever something terrifying or tragic has happened, the anniversary will serve as a strong reminder, renewing early reactions and feelings and increasing worries about something similar happening again. As the anniversary of a public tragedy approaches, there may be increased media attention, warnings, rumors, myths, and misconceptions that can easily add to these worries.

What to look for

Children may react to the anniversary of a traumatic event in a variety of ways, depending upon their age, developmental level, and previous experience with trauma and loss. Children can be agitated, anxious, withdrawn, or even aggressive. Young children tend to express fears at home, such as fears of sleeping alone, or worries about the safety of their loved ones. School-aged children can demonstrate very specific new fears and avoidant behavior related to what they now perceive as risky situations. In the case of major disasters or school-related events, adolescents may spread rumors or manufacture prophecies of impending danger or threat that are shared among their peer group. They can also respond to an anniversary with more reckless, acting out behavior. For some children, the anniversary of an event such as September 11th could renew concerns about personal safety and fears of recurrence. Children may even have hesitations about attending school around the time of an anniversary. For some, the anniversary of a tragic event may evoke a range of personal feelings of loss.

Who might need special support?

There are many different groups of children who may require special support during the anniversary period.

- For children who were directly affected by a tragic event, the anniversary carries very personal meaning.
- Children who have a history of trauma, violence, or sudden loss may require acknowledgement of their own personal tragedies and access to additional support and counseling.
- Children who tend to be anxious may be more reactive to “threat information,” be more susceptible to rumors and misconceptions, and have a harder time being reassured.
- Any suggestion of danger can increase the sense of vulnerability among children with physical, developmental, or mental disabilities.

How can you help?

- Anticipate reminders related to the anniversary and help children recognize and learn to cope with them. A child may not be fully aware of what he or she is remembering and may react with increased distress without knowing how or why the anniversary of 9/11 is triggering those feelings. By understanding children’s specific traumatic reminders, adults may be able to help them to react less strongly and cope more successfully.

- Let children acknowledge the anniversary in their own way. Some children may express considerable interest, while others may choose to ignore the anniversary altogether. Don't force children to participate in ceremonies or memorials, or overload them with information. Take your cue from your child. There is no one right reaction. However, parents should make themselves available to talk to children about their thoughts, fears and feelings if and when they are ready.
- Be honest with children. It's OK to share your own reactions and concerns. Kids learn by watching their parents. When grown-ups are holding back, they can usually tell. Some children will ask, "Could it happen again?" It's best to answer such questions as honestly as possible. One approach is to tell children that lots of people are working very hard to make the country and all the people as safe as possible, but that there's no way to absolutely guarantee or promise that there will be no future terrorist attacks.
- Share any concerns you may have about your children during this period of time with teachers or school personnel so that they can offer additional reassurance and be alert for signs of distress. Most schools will be dealing with the anniversary in one way or another. Talk to your child's teacher and find out what they have planned.
- Repeated exposure to traumatic images on television may heighten children's anxiety and distress. Try to limit your child's exposure to such scenes. It will be important to make sure that young children understand that what they may see on television is a replay and not another terrorist attack. Consider contacting local television stations to suggest they limit the use of this kind of footage.
- Provide children with opportunities to make a positive difference in their daily lives and in their community. Taking constructive action is an antidote to fear and helplessness. Families, schools, and communities can use the anniversary as an occasion to strengthen ties and renew shared values. Some children may be interested in writing a story or poem or drawing a picture about the events of last year. Children may also wish to send such pictures to area newspapers or TV stations. Other children may wish to send letters to police stations or fire departments.
- The events of 9/11 were serious, and our responses to the anniversary are legitimate, normal reactions to the seriousness of the original event. If a child's responses (e.g. nightmares, recurrent thoughts or fears) have been getting worse instead of better over time, consider seeking a referral to a trained and qualified mental health professional.

For more information:

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