



# Miami-Dade County Employee Assistance Program



## Trauma, Loss and the “Anniversary Effect”

The “Anniversary Effect” is related to a collection of intrusive feelings, thoughts or memories that occur on or around a date that marks a significant traumatic event or circumstance. This could be a death in the family, a collective community trauma or a significant change or loss within your life. During this time, you can struggle with feeling sad, irritable, anxious, emotionally shutdown, or unable to sleep. You may not even realize why you are feeling this way but a quick glance at the calendar will help you to connect this emotional state to a traumatic event. As that date nears, bad memories start to resurface, and you will realize that you are experiencing an echo of your past trauma.

### Emotional Wellness Tip:

#### ***Know that you are not alone***

Seek out the support of those around you and you will be surprised how much we have in common.



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### Emotional Wellness Stream:

<https://web.microsoftstream.com/channel/28dc7326-8d6f-4855-b3a2-70d7f6e8ca01>

Some psychology researchers think that the anniversary reaction should be listed as a symptom of PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder). This belief is rooted in the fact that even though being reminded of difficult feelings around an anniversary is a very common and normal part of the grieving process it can be really distressing. Anniversary reactions are also a signal that you may need to revisit processing the trauma of your experience, and work through any unresolved grief with a professional.

Research shows that our brains store painful, sad or traumatic memories in an easily accessible way so that we can be reminded and warned of danger to protect us from something similar happening again. For example, a driver involved in a car crash will have memories that provide information about what the driver should look out for, appropriate reactions and avoidable circumstances to prevent another similar crash from happening in the future. The anniversary of a traumatic event may also trigger these memories causing you to, in a way, have to live through some of those difficult and painful experiences and emotions again.

In addition, there are circumstances or similar events that resemble our own personal trauma that can trigger a reaction similar to the anniversary effect and cause us to re-experience the symptoms of our past loss or grief. These are normal reactions to trauma and signal to our brains and bodies to take extra care during these times.

If you or a loved one are struggling with the lingering effects of a past trauma, here are some tips to manage the “anniversary effect” and the emotions we may experience related to it:

**Plan ahead:** Take time to glance at the months ahead on your calendar, and be aware of any dates coming up that have memories attached to them. Remind yourself that days or weeks leading up to these anniversary dates could be tough for you and extend some extra grace and compassion during these times.

**Prepare:** If you have experienced an anniversary reaction in the past, do your best to make sure your supportive friends and family members know and

are free to be there for you. This will help to give you an outlet to express your feelings and alert your support system to your needs.

**Cut down on media:** Be aware not just of your own anniversaries but of any public or community traumas, such as terrorist events or natural disasters will receive media attention. This could possibly include distressing imagery, which could trigger your own personal memories. Limit your watching of TV, reading of newspapers and visiting Internet news sites around these times.

**Talk about it:** The single most important thing is finding a way to express your memories and feelings when you experience the anniversary effect. You can either: talk with a friend or family member; make notes or keep a diary about it; seek out some professional support or find other creative ways of expressing your feelings and inner experiences. Identify whatever feels most comfortable to you.

**Find an outlet:** Sometimes we can best express ourselves by leveraging our passions and hobbies. Make a plan to draw, dance, read or cook. Use these things to keep centered and grounded as you process through this difficult time.

**Look after yourself:** Be compassionate to yourself and remind yourself that this is part of the healing process. It is normal to experience these feelings and thoughts when you have experienced trauma. Make sure you take good care of yourself. Practicing self-care, seeking support and comfort will help you to move through your trauma.

**Commemorate** It is tempting to avoid thinking directly about this anniversary and the event at the center of it, but it can be very helpful to directly address your loss or trauma so you can release your feelings about it in productive way. You can do this by visiting the cemetery, making a donation or taking part in an event by a related charity.

**Remember it is temporary:** Anniversary reactions can be very strong and can seem overwhelming to some. Remind yourself that it is a normal reaction to trauma, and it will pass. Practice self-compassion as you move through this time.

**It is never too late:** If you were not able to find help when you suffered the original trauma/loss or had some but it didn't feel helpful at the time, you might feel frustrated or even ashamed that you are still having to deal with your trauma years later. Our EAP counselors report that some of their clients come 10, 20 or even more years after their trauma. There is never the wrong time to seek support.

Loss affects each of us differently, and there is no set amount of time in which you "should be over it". If you feel overwhelmed or that you cannot get through this anniversary, it might be a good time to talk to a mental healthcare professional. Our licensed EAP counselors focus on providing support and guidance to employees and their families with internal and external resources. Please reach out to our team at Miami-Dade Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to set up virtual or on-site assessment with a licensed EAP counselor by phone at 305-375-3293 or email [Jessica.Hughes-Fillette@miamidade.gov](mailto:Jessica.Hughes-Fillette@miamidade.gov).