

COPING WITH REMINDERS, HOLIDAYS AND OTHER ACTIVATING EVENTS AFTER A DISASTER

Reminders, holidays and other special days may be times mixed with sad memories and well as joy and new reasons to celebrate-even after a disaster. Know these times may be more difficult and renew some distress symptoms such as you felt right after the disaster. That is not unusual, and most people are able to get through these special times and get back to feeling a bit better once the reminder or special day passes with a little help from friends and family. We also have some suggestions that might help.

Be aware that special days may be difficult. This is normal and recognizing it as such may help you to not feel crazy and not be so hard on yourself. For many people, special days remind them of their losses. They may start anticipating the reminder or birthday or holidays for several days 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 special day will make you feel.

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

Participate in rituals that may provide soothing comfort. Whatever those rituals are-singing, praying, going to the beach, or movie; sharing a meal, going to a spiritual service.

Plan Activities. It is likely to be more helpful to plan what you are going to do (and who with) before the special date arrives. Plan your activities so that you know what to anticipate and are not disappointed if something you wanted to do is not possible because you didn't reserve the place or invite whomever you wanted to be with ahead of time. Don't set yourself up for disappointment.

Reach out to family and friends. There is no need to be alone and isolation is not helpful. Invite or accept invitations to participate in rituals, social events or even just to be in the company of another.

Do talk about your losses. Most people have a need to talk about their losses. This is normal and may continue beyond the reminder and special days. Find someone who will listen and understand.

Do things that might help you with overwhelming emotions. 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 the special days themselves. 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 telling them you miss them or even just telling them how you are doing. And talk to others you trust to understand. Think

about what may help you to cope with your feelings that may be heightened during reminders, holidays and special events.

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 self care.

Know that 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 holiday 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.

Draw on your faith and spirituality. For many, faith is a source of strength and comfort every day and most especially during difficult times. Reach out to your faith advisor and your spiritual community to support and console you.

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 anniversaries, birthdays and holidays 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.

Helping others may actually be a form of helping 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.