

International Critical Incident

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The Anniversary Dilemma

Anniversaries of tragedies can be difficult times for many people. For some, the anniversary date is a powerful reminder of loss. Family members and close friends experience the sadness, emptiness, and pain of a life which now only offers them a gaping hole in the fabric of life where there once was a vibrant and cherished person. For others, who may have tried to deny the tragedy's occurrence, the anniversary may break through their defenses and produce unexpected grief and feelings of despair.

Some people believe that if they got through the first year after a terrible event happened the worst is over for them. They have lived through a year full of generally "awful firsts". For example, the first birthday without their family member or friend or the first Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, or New Year may have produced poignant moments of pain for those left behind. Those poignant moments may pile up and produce their most serious impact during an anniversary time. The development of unexpected and intense feelings of grief can be overpowering for those who thought they had successfully denied their grief.

Still others see an anniversary of a tragedy as a milestone along the path to recovery. They hope that passing through the first anniversary will reassure them that a restoration of somewhat normal level of life activities is not only possible but that it is also close at hand. They realize that they have lived a whole year without their special person and they feel more confident that they can now make it through another. The doubts they once felt about their ability to survive without the loved one become less prominent.

Those who survived a tragedy, whether they were wounded or not, often find anniversaries bitter-sweet experiences. They are grateful that they lived through situations in which others perished, yet they feel intense guilt about the fact that others died. Intense feelings of terror and threat reverberate in their minds and hearts. Vivid dreams disturb their sleep. Anger and resentment toward those who caused significant changes in their lives predominate over calmer feelings. It is hard for anybody to feel the same around the anniversary of some significant tragedy.

Administrators of organizations, government agencies, and clergy in a wide range of congregations as well as family members and friends wonder what they should do to properly honor the memory of the dead while simultaneously alleviating the suffering of the living. ICISF has been asked for suggestions many times in the last few weeks as we approach the September 11th anniversary of the brutal attacks on America. The suggestions which follow may be useful guidelines for those who want to know what to do to deal with anniversaries of tragedies.

1. Each individual may deal with the anniversary of a tragedy in their own way. The first rule of managing the anniversary of a traumatic event is that there are few hard and fast rules. Some people need to visit the site of the tragedy, or a grave or a memorial site. Some will go to a place of worship and pray for their dead. Others will visit those who have sustained injuries or they will bring together friends and family for a quiet meal. Some need to express themselves in a public manner with other people while others need to manage the anniversary in a very private manner. No particular method of managing one's loss and grief is better than other methods. We all need to be understanding and tolerant of the methods people choose to deal with their grief. Their personality, culture and background may suggest to them different paths for the expression of their grief.
2. Public or private rituals can help people who are struggling with fear and loss. It is up to the individual to choose the rituals which will help the most. Many people need and choose a companion to accompany them through the rituals surrounding the anniversary. It is helpful to offer to go with someone if it appears that they may have to face the ritual alone. In some places a member of a local CISM team has been there through a ritual when no family member or close friend was available. If a person chooses to attend a ceremony by themselves, then that choice is respected.
3. Spiritually oriented memorial services can alleviate much pain. They should be carefully planned and presented. The more public citizens who are likely to attend, the greater the need for these services to be non-denominational.
4. Clergy or chaplain personnel can be instrumental in planning out the details of a religious or spiritually based memorial service. By the way, we should not overlook groups that have run memorial ceremonies for years. Concerns of Police Survivors and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have run such ceremonies and can be good advisors.

5. Grief seminars and other educational programs can help individuals or groups. Note: if both an educational program and a secular or spiritual memorial service are planned to be connected to each other, the secular or spiritual memorial service should go last.