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National Workforce Centre  
for Child Mental Health

# Traumatic events: anniversaries and other triggers



When a community is impacted by a disaster or traumatic event, it can take many months or even years for people and the community as a whole to feel like they are on the road to recovery. This path isn't a linear one: sometimes it can feel like we're stuck or going backwards as the anniversary of the event gets closer or when reminders of the trauma are triggered. Some trauma reminders can be unexpected and personal and catch us by surprise, while others are more predictable, such as fire alarms, siren sounds or smoke smells. Fortunately, with awareness and time, these 'triggers' can be managed.

This resource will provide some information on how to support and manage planned events that may cause distress, such as anniversaries, as well as situations that are less predictable.

## Anniversaries, significant dates or holidays

Anniversaries are times of remembering, reflection and review. When an anniversary marks something sad, distressing, terrifying or tragic, it can bring about reactions that are the same or similar to those a person originally experienced. For some, the remembering will renew worries that something similar might happen again.

Anxious feelings may surface any time we encounter a situation that triggers memories of the frightening event. Triggers can be easy to identify at times, such as heavy rain making us feel anxious, but often they are not so obvious, particularly for children. Like us, children may not be aware they have been 'triggered', so have no understanding of why they suddenly feel sad, worried or scared. Preparing and discussing how to manage known triggers, such as anniversaries or 'firsts' (e.g. the first Christmas without a loved one) can help us build our ability and that of our children to manage those triggers we cannot plan for.

We can prepare for these triggers by acknowledging they are normal and to be expected. With awareness, support, and helpful ways to manage emotions and thoughts that arise, the triggers will be less overwhelming and occur less frequently.

## Supporting children during these periods

When the anniversary of traumatic events such as a flood, earthquake or violent incident approaches, there's often greater media coverage and increased discussion in the community and schools about the event and the risk of future events. This may be helpful, but, as is often the case, children are vulnerable to over-exposure to such discussion and media coverage. Rarely do they have control over the nature, timing, degree and content of this exposure. As such, we need to be mindful of just how much children are hearing and seeing about the event. We need to factor in the effect of social media as well. Inundation of reminders of loss and distress can easily overwhelm children.

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Children may react to the anniversary of the event in a variety of ways, depending on their age, developmental level and previous experience with trauma, loss and the event itself. Their responses can occur in the weeks leading up to the anniversary of the event and will vary depending on:

- what they have experienced since the event
- the level of disruption experienced in their daily lives and on those around them
- the quality of the physical and emotional support they have received, and is now available from their family, community and school.

In the period leading up to the anniversary, children can become anxious, upset, withdrawn or angry without realising why they're feeling this way. Children might also show signs of reluctance to sleep alone or be away from parents, or worry for the safety of loved ones. They can demonstrate new fears and even avoid ordinary behaviour they now consider to be risky or potentially dangerous.

Older children, by contrast, may behave recklessly and act out, or spend time discussing the danger with their friends, trying to predict what might happen and devising strategies to keep safe. For some children and adolescents, the anniversary may trigger feelings of being unsafe and an increase in anxiety levels. They might not want to go to school or be away from family and loved ones, or participate in public anniversary events in any way. Instead, they may seek out relationships and environments where they feel protected from reminders of the event, and where there is familiarity, predictability and people who are able to 'tune in' to them.

### Those who might need special support

There are some children who will need a special eye kept on them and perhaps need additional support during the anniversary period. These are children who:

- were personally affected by the event because they:
  - were in the event or had loved ones in it
  - had family members or friends die as a consequence of the event
  - had their homes destroyed
  - had pets perish
  - were fearful for their lives or those of people they care about

- saw or experienced things that made them feel fearful
- have experienced any of a range of challenging life experiences since the event such as:
  - having to live in temporary accommodation
  - dealing with the relocation of their neighbourhood and/or school
  - having parents and teachers be stressed by the event and post-event demands
  - experiencing illness themselves or in significant others
  - losing someone significant to them
- have had prior to the traumatic event a history of trauma, grief, loss and/or displacement, which may also require recognition
- are known to be sensitive to emotional challenges and who need reassurance
- are physically, intellectually or otherwise vulnerable, or who have developmental disabilities.



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## What you can do to help?

### Open, age-appropriate communication

Be aware that an anniversary, or the days around it, may bring additional challenges and strong emotions. But they also may not. Monitor any responses and talk with your child about what you're observing.

Children are best supported when somebody important to them knows what's happening with them. It's okay to talk to your children about things that have happened to them, what they are thinking and what their feelings might be.

Your children might be feeling more worried or scared, or sadder than usual. They might be thinking more about the event or how their lives have changed.

What they think and feel might be reflected in the things they talk about, or in their drawings or play.



It can be helpful to begin your conversations in an open way such as:

- 'I notice you seem a bit edgier (or quieter) than usual... I wonder why that is?'
- 'It seems to me like you're talking (or drawing or playing) more about "the event" at the moment... I wonder why that is?'
- 'People seem to be thinking about the "event" a lot again... I wonder if it's like that for you?'
- 'Lots of people I chat to are feeling a bit sad at the moment remembering what happened at "the event", how about you? Have you been feeling like that at all?'

It's not uncommon for children (and adults at times) to feel generally more anxious but not link it to the trigger of the anniversary. By understanding children's specific traumatic reminders or triggers and their personal feelings, fears and concerns, adults may be able to help them to feel more settled, react less strongly and cope more comfortably.

You may also be feeling anxious about the anniversary. Be honest and genuine with your children. It's okay to share your feelings and thoughts: this allows them to learn from you and to know that you're open to talking and expressing feelings about such things. However, if possible, address and manage your own deep and intense emotional moments with the help of other adults, especially if there's no one present to focus fully on your children and the impact on them.

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