

Help Me Deal with Special Days and Anniversaries

Our society marks the anniversaries of significant world events. Most of MY generation remembers where they were you when President Kennedy was shot, or when Elvis or John Lennon died? The anniversary of the death of Princess Diana sees albeit shrinking commemorations, and the horrific events of 9/11 in New York, marked by monthly remembrance services on the 11th of every month in the first year, are now remembered annually.

Memory writes on every page of the calendar throughout the year. Here a wedding anniversary, there a birthday, everywhere another significant celebration. After someone dies, these meaningful days can be difficult as we realize once more that they can never be repeated with that someone you have loved.

Why is it that significant anniversary occasions are so painfully difficult? Memories are the grieving mind's invitation to **remember**, rather than to **forget**. The remembering of special days and anniversary occasions puts the fact of the death into a context. We remember that it was one month or a year ago, and that provides a framework, a chronological context in which we can place an event that still seems unreal and unimaginable. The anniversary gives us another opportunity to revisit the event in order to believe the unbelievable and accept the unacceptable a little more fully.

As anniversary occasions loom darkly on the horizon, we dread it, realizing that tears we thought and even hoped were behind us will swell again, and that the loneliness of missing the person will rise to the surface.

Sometimes people are tempted to think they can avoid the painful reminder. "I'm just going to pretend it is just like any other day. I'm not going to think about it." I recall a gentleman who decided on that course of action the first Christmas after his wife died. "I'm going on holiday to Mexico" I recollect him saying. "I'm going to sit on a beach and enjoy the warm sun, and not think about the holidays, and I'm not coming back till January." I wished him well, and off he went. When I saw him in January I asked how the strategy had worked. His words were telling. "They have Christmas in Mexico." He was unable to avoid the memories.

We have a choice. We cannot escape the impact of those days. These anniversary reminders of life and death are unavoidable. The only choice is whether we will

control the grief or whether we will allow the grief to control US. Avoidance does not work well, because just when we least expect it, grief taps us on the shoulder and we are consumed by it. We may even get through the actual day well, but the grief attack will occur a day or so earlier, or a week or two later. Reconciling our loss and putting it to rest will be accomplished by working at it, not by ignoring and hoping it will go away. I encourage people to realize that “The first is the worst” and the sooner we go through the challenge, the easier it is.

So how can we meet these milestones head on and allow them to be a bridge to a brighter tomorrow?

- * Begin by planning a departure from your usual activities. Take the dreaded day off work, for there is no use pretending that this day is like any other. Don't allow anyone, or yourself, accuse you of “wallowing in your grief” by doing this. Taking time to mourn and remember is actually facing reality much more than avoiding it.
- * Choose your company. Who would you like to spend this day with? Don't assume that the BEST company is those with whom you have always spent that day. You may feel more comfortable with someone who has been in your shoes.
- * **DO NOT wait for someone to remember.** Your grief easily slips out of mind even with your closest friends and family. Take the initiative to call them and suggest you get together. Start dropping little reminders when the dread of the day's approach first starts to trouble you. Cash in those “if there's anything I can do” offers. Be specific. Say you need someone to drive you to the cemetery, take you to lunch, or provide a shoulder to cry on.
- * Many find that some kind of ritual can help. A memorial service, the lighting of a memorial candle or a mass said for the deceased can not only mark the day, but also be symbolic of your survival and determination. I recall one lady who after a year of holding on to her husband's ashes, used the anniversary occasion for a committal of the remains, symbolizing for her a readiness to move into the future.
- * Do whatever would be meaningful for YOU. On a birthday, why not do something to celebrate the person's LIFE as well as commemorate their death - maybe an activity that you would have enjoyed together. Or write a

new obituary which would contain all the memories you have of the person, their physical appearance, idiosyncrasies and qualities that were important.

- * If you have regrets over unfinished business, words that were left unsaid or some unresolved quarrel, consider saying what you need and want to say in a letter to the deceased, or by expressing them to a trusted friend or counselor.
- * Claim your memories. “Memories give us the power to gather roses in winter.” Get out the photograph albums, scrapbooks, love letters and line up all the gifts and souvenirs you cherish. Call to mind the joys AND the struggles that shaped this interrupted relationship. Doing this can be painful at first, but memories have a wonderful way of softening as we work with them, and you will be left with a warm glow of thankfulness that while you grieve what you have lost, you are thankful for all you had.
- * Perhaps you could also re-read the cards and notes you received and the visitors book from the funeral. These will remind you that in the most difficult days of your life, you were not alone, and that the people who cared then still care now, even though they may not be as vocal or forthcoming.
- * Take time to look forward. While you grieve for the past, celebrate TODAY’S joys. Count the blessings you have, and the people who are still or have become a part of your life. Are there any of THOSE relationships that could use some attention, or things that could be said and expressed.
- * Think big. Plan one thing you would like for the future, whether a vacation, redecorating the house, or a change of job or scene. But also think small. Do something for today. Plan a lunch; get that book you’ve been meaning to read; rearrange the living room furniture; clean out a closet; go for a walk or take in a movie. Something YOU would like to do FOR you.

Anniversaries serve as an opportunity to take stock; to see where the river of time and circumstance has led; to review some lessons and plan what is ahead. And if nothing else, they serve to remind us that we have made it thus far, and that in itself is worth celebrating.