

## A FLOOD OF EMOTIONS: THE ANNIVERSARY

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With any crisis or disaster, there is typically a time to "mark" the traumatic event's anniversary. Many people assume that disaster-related grief will diminish with time, that grief follows a straight line from high to low. But time does not heal all wounds immediately. Feelings of isolation, sadness, anger, lack of meaning, and despair might occur long after the disaster. These feelings are not necessarily back-slides into depression; they are simply normal anniversary reactions.

Not everyone associated with a major disaster or crisis will have anniversary reactions. Nor will all reactions be the same. Waves of grief might occur at certain times during the year: at the first major spring rain, the anniversary month of the major flooding or around the time that "buy-outs" were finalized. Certain stimuli may provoke anniversary reactions. For children, that stimulus might be rain, thunder or large bodies of water. For adults smells, photographs, or news accounts of the flood or other disasters may trigger grief.

Those directly affected by the disaster are not the only ones to experience anniversary reactions. Disaster relief workers, human service providers, government officials, and whole communities may experience some grief as anniversaries approach. To cope with reawakened grief, formal and informal activities may be helpful. Anniversary rituals help prepare for anticipated grief by structuring remembrances and the expression of feelings and thoughts. Structure provides some control of feelings that may seem overwhelming during the anniversary.

### The "Celebration" of Disaster Anniversaries

The first step in preparing for anniversary "celebrations" and anticipated grief reactions is **recognition**.

- **Recognize** the possible reactions attached to the anniversary. Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Losses due to disaster may be as difficult to deal with as losses due to death.
- **Recognize** that not everyone in a community surviving disaster will be at the same stage in their grief. Some citizens may have not been affected by the disaster and consider it a minor inconvenience, while others may still be homeless, without employment, and struggling with fragments of formerly organized lives.
- **Recognize** overly stressed disaster relief and human service workers due to their continuous efforts to serve the identified "victims" of the disaster. Workers can often become the "silent victims" of the disaster when their work goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Often, their work must end due to other service demands, without having some sense of how clients will succeed or survive.
- **Recognize** that not all communities can nor want to recognize the impact of the disaster. Some communities may choose to avoid or deny the impact of the disaster; some will choose to eliminate any sign of the disaster by altering their perception (e.g., blaming others) or purging the community of the disaster's aftermath. Not all communities will be able to assimilate or integrate the disaster into its structure and patterns of interaction. Not all communities will be able to absorb the lessons that the disaster offered.

Given these variables in recognition, personal, family, and community, anniversary celebrations must be planned and executed with care. For example, not everyone in the family or community will be ready to make sand castles from river sand washed up in neighboring wheat fields. Anniversary rituals recognize the reality of the crisis that has changed individual lives and communities.

## Celebration Planning

When planning anniversary celebrations, keep limits on rituals. Make them useful and meaningful, such as replanting trees that were destroyed by the flood. Decide what kind of ritual or activity best suits potential participants. Target the community's celebration to those who have lost homes, farms, or businesses due to flooding, then broaden the events' focus to include the families of victims, disaster relief workers, support staff, schools, civic organizations, government, and the media.

Children, farmers, older adults, single disabled adults, people with limited incomes, and others, all have unique experiences related to the disaster and may have unique anniversary reactions and grief. At any community anniversary event, involve mental health professionals who are able to assist family and friends if emotions become unexpectedly extreme.

No matter what community "celebration" is planned for the anniversary of the disaster, be sure to:

- Provide for a variety of activities or rituals; people grieve or "celebrate" differently;
- Make the "celebration" organized, limited, and appropriate so that emotions (both positive and negative) are manageable;

- Keep "celebration" activities compatible with the moods of the community, consider where the majority of the community is emotionally, but be prepared for the unexpected;
- Actively involve disaster survivors in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the "celebration." Activity helps in the healing process; likewise, involve mental health and human service professionals; and
- Appreciate the fact that recognition of the disaster's anniversary, however slight, may be vital to the health and healing of the community and its citizens. The anniversary can serve as another step towards integrating the disaster into the community's history.

## **Communities Can Provide Support in Times of Trouble**

During disaster recovery, isolation and withdrawal may be an issue. The following are aspects of community neighboring in time of crisis that might be helpful.

- Emphasize the importance of community.
- Help people be aware that many factors work against community when experiencing disaster.
- Encourage people to emotionally "draw close" to deal with the distancing of other's emotions.
- Emphasize that people can be helped by small deeds.
- Encourage people to find support when they need it; normalize emotions of grief.
- Effective growth, development, and maintenance of community requires widespread support and knowledge of available resources.
- Emphasize that the people in our lives are resources.

(Excerpted from Wright, Sara, and Rosenblatt, Paul C., (1987) "Isolation and farm loss: Why neighbors may not be supportive." Family Relations, 36:391-395.)

## **Ideas for Community Anniversary Activities**

- Sidewalk chalk art, music, coloring, painting
- Community tours: rebuilt homes, businesses, farms
- Appreciation Days or Events for disaster workers, government officials
- Community meals, dinners, and potlucks

- Photo/video exhibitions (Film Festivals)
- Erect a temporary "Wall of Memory" for notes, photos, items related to the flood
- Community organizations, youth groups prepare "disaster kits"
- Flood Artifact auction to raise funds for future disaster reliefs

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