

## Understanding and managing anniversary reactions: Tips for families affected by natural disasters



Anniversaries are times of remembering, reflecting and review. When the anniversary marks something sad, distressing, terrifying or tragic it might bring about the same or similar reactions to those originally experienced. For some, the remembering will renew feelings and worries that something similar might happen again. For others, the anniversary might bring new challenges, such as thinking about the events and wondering about the future.

As the anniversary of a natural disaster such as a flood, earthquake or bushfire approaches there is often increased media coverage, increased discussion in the community and schools about the event and the potential 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 of the nature, timing, degree and content of this exposure.

### Understanding your children during the anniversary period

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 fires themselves. Other influencing factors will include experiences since the event, which may have been helpful or unhelpful, and the impact of these, as well as emotional support currently available to them from

parents, extended family, other significant people and their school. At anniversary times children can become anxious, upset, withdrawn or angry without realising what the feelings are about. Young children might also show signs of reluctance to sleep alone, be away from parents and worry for the safety of loved ones.

School-aged children can demonstrate new fears and avoidant behaviour around what they now consider is risky or potentially dangerous. Adolescents may become more reckless and act out, or spend time discussing the danger with their friends, trying to predict what might happen and strategies to keep safe. For some children and adolescents, the anniversary will trigger their feelings of being unsafe and increase their level of anxiety. They might not want to go to school, 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:

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- » were personally affected by the event, either by being caught up in them or had loved ones caught up, who have had family members or friends die as a consequence of the event, whose homes were destroyed or who had pets perish, were fearful for their lives or those of people they care about, saw or experienced things that made them feel fearful or terrified
- » have experienced any of a range of challenging life events since the event such as temporary accommodation, relocation of neighbourhood and or school, whose parents and teachers have been stressed by the event and post event demands, have experienced illness themselves or in significant others and perhaps death of someone important
- » have a previous history of trauma, grief, loss and 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.

### What you can do to help?

#### Open & age-appropriate communication

Be aware that the anniversary may bring with it additional challenges and strong emotions. But also it may not. Monitor any responses and talk with your child about what you are observing.

Children are best supported when somebody important to them knows what's happening for 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, scared, or sad 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, in their drawings, or their play.

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

- » "I notice you seem a bit edgier (or a bit jumpier, or quieter) than usual ... I wonder why that is?"
- » "It seems to me like you are talking (or drawing or playing) more about the fires 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?"

It is not uncommon for children to feel generally more anxious and 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 to cope more comfortably.

You may also be feeling anxious about the anniversary. Be honest and genuine with children. It's okay to share your feelings and thoughts; this allows them to learn from you and to know that you are open to talking and expressing feelings about such things. However, if possible, your own deep and intense emotional moments are best managed in an adults-only context, especially if there is not someone present to focus fully on your child and the impact on them.

### For more information

The Trauma & Grief Network: Supporting families

[www.tgn.anu.edu.au](http://www.tgn.anu.edu.au)

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