

ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS

The Sibling Connection

One of the most troublesome reactions to a major loss is called an "anniversary reaction", when grief returns in full force on or near:

- The anniversary of the sibling's death
- His or her birthday
- Holiday times
- While listening to certain music

Transitional events, such as a re-location, promotion, marriage, etc. Our subconscious mind is a ruthless timekeeper where loss is concerned. It is as if we have a calendar within us. Often without even being consciously aware of the date, acute pain surfaces, and we begin to feel terrible, but we don't associate the emotional pain with the loss that happened long ago. At other times, even though we are very much aware of the reason for the pain, it is still intense, and feels as if it will last forever.

What helps survivors deal with anniversary reactions? Sometimes, simply becoming aware of the date can help reduce the pain. Since anniversary reactions may come up decades later, this is more difficult than you might imagine.

Jonathan

"When my brother died, I had no idea that it would continue to have an impact on my life, even now when I am 15 years older than I was then. My brother, Brian, died on April 19th, and last year, as that date approached, I began to feel terrible. But I didn't realize that it had anything to do with Brian's death. It seemed like everyone in the family was against me.

My kids were annoying me deliberately. My wife got on my nerves constantly and I was thinking that everything was her fault. One day I answered the phone, and happened to look at the calendar next to the phone. Suddenly, it hit me. April 19th! A surge of grief came over me, and I had to hand the phone to my wife.

I went into the bedroom and started to cry. It seemed like yesterday--he was sixteen years old and I was seventeen. He was in a car wreck. A truck plowed into him as he turned into the bowling alley. He went into a coma, and they thought he was coming around, but suddenly, his brain swelled up and he died.

After that, everything went back to normal, and I wasn't so angry. This year, though, I was prepared. I gave the flowers at church in my brother's memory. I don't know why, but it was easier to get through the end of April this year."

Alice

"It never occurred to me that I would be sad about my sister's death when my first child was born. At first, I was so happy. Then I realized that if my sister had lived, she would be so happy for me. It seemed like I was losing not the young girl who died from leukemia when she was eight years old and I was ten, but the grown-up MaryAnn would have become. She would have been my best friend, the aunt to my child, she would have been joyous because of this birth. I was happy and sad at the same time."