



Regional Research Institute
Portland State University
1600 SW 4th Ave, Ste 900
Portland, OR 97201

<https://traumainformedoregon.org>
info@traumainformedoregon.org

A Trauma-Informed Approach to Commemorating Anniversaries

The *anniversary effect* includes the emotional, psychological and physical reactions people experience around or on an anniversary of an adverse event that often includes loss, trauma and/or major life changes. As the date approaches you might notice some changes in sleep or memories surfacing, emotions feeling closer to the surface, feeling anxious or a heaviness that is hard to name. You also might feel numb or feel settled. And of course, you are likely to experience all of these feelings at different times. Anniversary fractions are a real and recognize part of how trauma is stored in our body and mind and how our bodies and mind can help us heal. The date carries weight and history even as this changes over time.

Before the Anniversary

- Talk about the upcoming anniversary with your therapist, other support people and/or journal about what you are experiencing and expect.
- Identify if there are people, pets or nature you want around you during this time.
- Be mindful of making too many commitments around the anniversary. If you can, give yourself some room and spaciousness to change plans.
- Think about what has helped you in hard moments before.

Limit External Exposure

If the event was public, the anniversary may bring coverage, social media posts, and other peoples' narratives about what happened - some accurate, some not, some well-meaning but painful. You have the RIGHT to:

- Mute or step away from social media entirely around this time.
- Ask someone you trust to monitor coverage so you are not taken by surprise.
- Watch or listen if you want and you can change your mind – turn it off – anytime.
- Record media you want to watch so you can pause, start and stop.
- Make the incoming stimulus as small as possible by watching on your phone versus a large T.V., listening instead of watching, watch or listen outside in nature, etc.
- Have comforts around you if you engage with social media or the news (a friend, pet, blanket, cup of tea, fidget, water, etc.).
- Ask “How am I experiences this in my mind and body at this moment?”

Participating in Public Events:

- Know the agenda or program so your nervous system can settle better.
- Have a support person who you can signal to as needed. Maybe have a signal.
- Keep an object of comfort in your pocket such as a rock or piece of felt.
- Give yourself permission to step out at any point - arriving doesn't mean staying. And permission to step back in as you want.
- Use earbuds to distract with calming music or to reduce noise.
- Hydrate, move about as you can, access nature, take deep breaths as you can.
- Ask for a pause or things to be repeated.

On the Day Itself

- Check-in with yourself gently throughout the day. Don't wait until you are overwhelmed
- Eat, drink water, move your body as you can - basics matter more than usual with your under strain.
- Find an object or place that is calming to focus your gaze (a tree, a window, a person)
- If tears come - let them, and if they do not that is fine also.
- You can expect tears, joy in remembering a loved one, somberness, anger, love through connecting, loneliness, a need for a hug or a hand to hold, or a need for space from others. All are typical.

After the Anniversary

- The days that follow can sometimes feel harder than the day itself, once the bracing for it is over or the events are completed. Be gentle with yourself in the aftermath. You don't have to snap back.
- Anniversary events may also bring new and renewed connections with others who have similar experiences you can be in touch with.

Things that Matter Most

- You have already survived the hardest thing. The anniversary is not the event itself — it is only a date. It has weight, but it does not have the same power as what you actually lived through.
- You are allowed to still be affected by this. You are allowed to not be over it. You are also allowed to find that this year feels different — lighter, or more distant — without guilt.
- However this anniversary finds you, you don't have to face it alone.