

Anniversary Reactions Through the Year's Whole Cycle

THE CALENDAR can be an emotional minefield. Wedding anniversaries. Birthdays. Anniversaries of important personal events. The major holidays that bring family and friends together — Easter and Passover, Memorial Day, 4th of July and Cinco de Mayo, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hannukah. Those Hallmark holidays — Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. They all can set off strong emotions.

These are called, not surprisingly, "anniversary reactions." They are part of the grief process, not just this year, but beyond. You may dread these dates, especially this first year. You may think, "Will I be hit by powerful emotions? How will I handle them?"

Indeed, you may be painfully sad. Or you may be angry. On the other hand, you may not react strongly, then feel guilty. We encourage you, however you react, to be accepting about it.

Before one of those dates nears, think about how you may react. What can you do that day to create comfort or joy in remembering or honoring your loved one? Do you want to be active? Then maybe meet family or friends to do one of your loved one's favorite activities — dinner at a favorite restaurant, a picnic at

their favorite park, watching their favorite sports team? Or would you prefer to invite close friends to your home to reminisce? Did your loved one have a favorite cause or charity? Each year, on their birthday, donate to it in their memory.

Most important, don't get caught up on what you "should" do — I should throw that party because we always did, I should visit the gravesite, and so on. That sort of thinking causes unneeded guilt, anxiety, and heartache.

Don't get caught up on "how we always did it." Let it slide.

Don't get caught up focusing on what friends or family expect. Focus instead on what you can do that would be best for you on that day.

Perhaps this means you decide you don't want to talk about your loved one all day. Perhaps you realize that hosting that party this year would be too stressful. That's perfectly fine.

When that day on the calendar arrives, you may follow your plan to the letter. On the other hand, you may not. As we said, there are no "shoulds." These are days that can pile on the stress and anxiety. Recognizing and addressing your fears will prove more helpful than avoiding or suppressing them. ■



Keep a Journal — Written, Spoken, in Pictures or Video

A VALUABLE WAY to process grief is to keep a journal. Think of "journal" in its broadest terms, however. That is, keep a record, but express yourself in whatever form works best for you. These days, your choices are many.

❖ **Write it** on a computer, in a notebook, or in a leather-bound volume. Maybe you like poetry or stories.

❖ **Record it in sound** on a computer or smartphone or old-style cassettes. Just talk. Or, if you're musical, write songs or other music. If you're writing poems or stories, recite them.

❖ **Record it in video** YouTube-style, using a smartphone, or with a video camera.

❖ **Draw, paint or photograph it.** Do it the way you express yourself best or enjoy the most. Date and describe each work; at the least, title or caption each. If more words come to mind, write them down to pair with the visual. That leads to the first of five rules.

RULE 1: Mix it up. — Suppose you mostly write. Then include drawings in your margins or on a whole page when words fail you. Suppose you record songs or poems. When you're not inspired, recite or sing a favorite work that has special meaning that day. These days, your choices are endless. So choose whatever keeps you going.

RULE 2: Make it a habit. — Decide how often you will make an entry, and keep to that schedule. Don't overcommit at the start, but realize you can change the habit as you go. Daily may feel necessary to start, but at some point change to weekly. Or vice versa.

RULE 3: Discover ways to always record something. — Some days you won't feel like doing it. Have ways ready to jumpstart you.

RULE 4: Don't censor yourself.

RULE 5: There are no rules. — At least, there are no rules about what to include or exclude. Nor are there rules about who else, if anyone, sees what you create. This is *your* journal. ■

