

Grief Triggers, Anniversaries and Sudden Waves

A full Support Hub article about understanding grief with warmth, depth and practical guidance.

Why reminders can feel so powerful

Memory is not stored as a neat written record. People are connected in our minds with places, sounds, smells, routines, seasons, objects, phrases and bodily experiences. A particular perfume, a football result, the light at a certain time of year or a song playing unexpectedly can bring the person and the absence sharply into awareness.

Cruse notes that some reminders are obvious, such as a birthday or the date of death, while others are unpredictable, including music, smells and television programmes. This helps explain why somebody can feel relatively steady and then become overwhelmed in a supermarket aisle or while driving home.

A trigger is not evidence that you have failed to heal. It is a reminder meeting a relationship that still matters. The emotional response may change over time, but there is no deadline by which reminders must become easy.

The body can recognise a date before you consciously do

People sometimes report feeling unsettled, irritable, tearful or unable to sleep and only later realise that a significant date is approaching. The calendar is embedded in routines and sensory cues: changing weather, school terms, Christmas decorations, a particular holiday or the first signs of spring can all be linked with what happened.

This is sometimes called an anniversary reaction. It does not require conscious counting. The body and mind can recognise patterns through context. Understanding this can reduce the confusion of asking, 'Why am I suddenly struggling again?'

If you know a difficult period is approaching, consider lowering unnecessary demands. You may want more company, less social contact, a day away from work or simply permission not to make the date meaningful. Planning is about giving yourself options, not forcing a ritual.

Birthdays, death anniversaries and celebrations

Significant dates can carry contradictory feelings. A birthday may hold beautiful memories and acute absence. Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Hanukkah, Mother's Day, Father's Day, weddings and family holidays can highlight the empty place within a group. A celebration can be genuinely joyful and painful at the same time.

There is no correct way to mark these days. Some people visit a grave, light a candle, cook a favourite meal, raise money, share photographs or gather with family. Others deliberately keep the day ordinary. Some make a plan and then discover they cannot follow it. Cruse recommends planning ahead while recognising that what feels right is personal.

You are allowed to change traditions. Keeping every tradition can feel comforting, but it can also feel like trying to recreate a life that no longer exists. New traditions do not erase the old ones.

The second year and later anniversaries

The first anniversary is not necessarily the hardest. Cruse notes that some people find the second year equally difficult or harder. During the first year there may have been more contact, formal milestones and acknowledgement from others. Later, the outside world may expect life to have returned to normal while the

permanence of the loss becomes clearer.

Years later, a date can still hurt. This does not mean grief has remained unchanged every day in between. A particular anniversary may temporarily concentrate memories and meaning that are usually held within a much larger life.

Try not to measure progress by whether an anniversary still affects you. A more useful question is whether you have more choices around how you respond, more support, more understanding of your needs and more life around the grief.

Unexpected sensory and situational triggers

Smell can be particularly evocative: aftershave, hospital disinfectant, baking, tobacco, flowers or a person's home. Music can collapse time in seconds. A voice in a crowd may resemble theirs. A television storyline can unexpectedly mirror the circumstances of the death. Even seeing somebody of a similar age can bring a sharp sense of what has been lost.

Situational triggers can also emerge at milestones. Getting married without a parent present, having a baby after losing your own mother, reaching the age the person was when they died, retiring without the partner you expected to share it with, or moving house can all reactivate grief.

These moments are not always avoidable, nor must every reminder be deliberately confronted. You can leave a room, turn something off, ask for a warning, postpone a visit or decide that today is not the day. Choice matters.

Planning ahead without trying to control grief

A useful anniversary plan has flexibility. Decide what you might like to do, who you might want nearby and what you will do if the plan suddenly feels wrong. Give yourself an exit route from social events. Arrange transport that does not leave you dependent on staying. Tell one trusted person that the date may be difficult.

Consider practical needs too. Eat beforehand if grief affects appetite. Avoid scheduling unnecessary appointments. If work is likely to be difficult, discuss leave or flexibility in advance where possible. If family members want different things, it may be kinder to create separate ways of remembering than to force one shared event.

You can also plan for the day after. Emotional anticipation can be tiring, and a significant date may leave you depleted even if it went 'well'.

When family members remember differently

Anniversaries can expose differences in family relationships. One person may post publicly on social media; another may find public sharing upsetting. One wants the person's name spoken; another becomes overwhelmed by conversation. Neither reaction automatically tells us who loved more.

Try to discuss plans before the date rather than in the middle of heightened emotion. Use personal language: 'I would like to visit the grave in the morning' rather than 'We should all visit the grave'. Make invitations rather than demands.

Children and young people may also move in and out of grief quickly. They can be sad and then play minutes later. Allow their involvement in remembrance to be age-appropriate and voluntary rather than expecting them to display adult grief.

When reminders begin to contain warmth as well as pain

Over time, some triggers change. A song that once had to be switched off may eventually bring tears and a smile. A recipe may become something you cook to feel connected. A place may shift from being unbearable to meaningful. This change cannot be forced.

Continuing bonds - maintaining an inner or symbolic relationship with the person who died - can take many forms. You might speak to them in your thoughts, keep an object, continue a tradition, tell stories, support a cause they cared about or notice how their influence remains in your choices.

The aim is not to turn every painful reminder into something positive. Some will always hurt. It is enough to know that grief and loving memory can gradually occupy the same space.

Therapy, support and when to ask for more help

Grief does not have to reach crisis point before support is appropriate. Some people want to talk soon after a loss; others prefer to rely on family, friends, faith, community or their own routines and only seek professional support later. Not everyone needs counselling. What matters is having choices.

Person-centred counselling can provide a private, non-judgemental space where you are not expected to perform grief in a particular way. Bereavement counselling may be helpful when you want to explore the relationship, the circumstances of the death, guilt, anger, identity, family changes or the practical reality of living after loss. Where a death was frightening, sudden or traumatic, a suitably qualified trauma-informed practitioner may be appropriate, particularly if intrusive memories, nightmares, avoidance or a persistent sense of threat are dominating everyday life.

Couples or family therapy can be useful when grief is exposing very different coping styles. One person may need to talk repeatedly while another becomes quiet; one may want photographs and rituals around them while another finds reminders unbearable. Therapy can help people understand that difference without automatically interpreting it as rejection or lack of love.

Speak with your GP when grief is having a substantial effect on sleep, appetite, physical symptoms, anxiety, depression or your ability to manage daily life. NHS guidance also describes prolonged grief disorder, where severe grief remains persistently disabling and a person may struggle to accept the death or return to ordinary activities. Suicidal thoughts require prompt support. If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, seek urgent help; Samaritans can be contacted free on 116 123, day or night.

A Message From Me

If a date, smell, song or ordinary moment suddenly brings grief close again, it does not mean you have gone backwards. It means the relationship and the memories still have meaning.

I want you to give yourself permission to be where you are rather than where you think you should be. There is no prize for grieving quickly, quietly or neatly. Some days may contain tears; others may contain ordinary life, laughter or even joy. Both can belong to the same grief.

On difficult days, make life smaller. Drink something. Eat what is manageable. Sit somewhere you feel safe. Let something non-urgent wait. Tell somebody if you need company. You do not have to carry every part of the future today.

And when life begins to feel lighter in places, let it. Living does not mean forgetting. New memories do not erase old ones, and moments of happiness do not reduce the love that came before them.

With warmth,

Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy

Books that may help

Grief Works - Julia Samuel. A broad, compassionate exploration of bereavement and the many forms grief can take.

The Plain Guide to Grief - John Wilson. Clear, accessible explanations of grief and practical ways of understanding what may be happening.

It's OK That You're Not OK - Megan Devine. Particularly helpful for challenging the pressure to make grief tidy, positive or quickly resolved.

The Grieving Brain - Mary-Frances O'Connor. Explores grief through the lens of learning, attachment, memory and the brain.

A Grief Observed - C. S. Lewis. A personal account of bereavement that captures contradiction, pain, questioning and the changing experience of loss.

Places to find support

Cruse Bereavement Support - bereavement information and support. Helpline: 0808 808 1677. cruse.org.uk

NHS - grief, bereavement and loss information, GP support and NHS Talking Therapies. nhs.uk

Samaritans - free emotional support, day or night. Call 116 123. samaritans.org

The Good Grief Trust - bereavement information and signposting. thegoodgrieftrust.org

Space to Breathe Therapy Support Hub - further mental health and wellbeing resources. spacetobreathetherapy.co.uk

This resource is educational and supportive and does not replace individual medical or mental-health assessment, diagnosis or treatment.