

Hard Days Ahead

ANTICIPATORY COPING PLAN · ANNIVERSARY AND TRIGGER-DATE REACTIONS

A plan for anniversaries, firsts and other difficult dates

Some dates carry extra weight: an anniversary, a birthday, the first holidays after a loss or separation, a diagnosis date, or a court hearing. Planning ahead won't take the feeling away, but it can make the day more manageable.

The date

What it marks for me

A hard day often casts a shadow either side of it, so plan for the days around it too.

-5

-4

-3

-2

-1

THE DAY



+1

+2

+3

+4

+5

The lead-up · dread often starts days before

The days after · tiredness, or relief

01 What might come up

tick any you expect; all are understandable

☐ Sadness

☐ Longing

☐ Anger

☐ Anxiety or dread

☐ Numbness

☐ Guilt

☐ Relief

☐ Vivid memories

☐ Loneliness

☐ Feeling on edge

☐ Tiredness

☐ Mixed feelings

02 My plan

before, on the day, and after

The lead-up

how I'll look after myself in the days before

On the day

a loose shape for the day, with room to change it

Morning

Afternoon

Evening

The days after

rest, recovery and gentle routine

03 Who I'll have with me

in person, by phone, or on standby

Person	How they could help	Have I asked?
		☐ yes
		☐ yes
		☐ yes

04 If-then plans

deciding now, so it's easier in the moment

If		then I'll	
If		then I'll	
If		then I'll	

05 On this day, I'm allowed to

tick what feels true

☐ Mark it my own way

☐ Not mark it at all

☐ Change plans

☐ Leave early

☐ Feel more than one thing

☐ Laugh, and still grieve

☐ Ask for company

☐ Ask for space

Kind words I'd say to a friend facing this day

Understanding Anniversary Reactions

Why certain dates hit hard, what's expected, and when to seek more support

Reactions to significant dates are common after loss, separation, trauma or major life events. Knowing what's typical, and what may signal something more, can help you respond with understanding rather than alarm.

06 Why dates can hit hard

the psychology behind it

Memory is *cued*

Dates, seasons, weather, smells and places are powerful memory cues. They can bring back feelings, sometimes before you've consciously noticed the date.

The body *reacts*

Tension, poor sleep or low energy may appear in the lead-up. This is a stress response, not a sign of going backwards.

Anticipation *magnifies*

People tend to overestimate how intense and lasting future feelings will be, and underestimate how well they'll cope. The lead-up can be harder than the day.

Firsts carry *meaning*

Rituals and shared occasions can highlight an absence or a change, which is why "firsts" are often especially hard.

07 Expected, or worth an assessment?

a guide, not a diagnosis

	Often expected	Worth a clinical assessment
Grief <i>after a death</i>	Waves of sadness and longing around the date, even years later. Often eases within days.	Intense yearning or preoccupation most days, for at least 12 months (6 months in ICD-11), with marked pain, identity disruption or numbness, and difficulty functioning. Prolonged grief disorder may be considered.
Trauma-linked dates <i>accident, assault, hearing</i>	Unease, being more alert, or memories coming to mind as the date approaches.	Intrusive memories or nightmares, strong physical reactions to reminders, avoidance and feeling on edge for more than a month, affecting daily life. PTSD may be considered.
Mood <i>any hard date</i>	Some low or flat days around the date.	Low mood or loss of interest most of the day, nearly every day, for two weeks or more. Depression may be considered.

Only a qualified clinician can assess these conditions. Criteria are summarised from DSM-5-TR (2022) and ICD-11. Effective treatments are available for each.

08 What the evidence suggests helps

why this plan is built the way it is

Specific *if-then* plans

Plans that link a situation to a response ("If I wake early and dreading it, then I'll call Sam") make follow-through more likely than general intentions.

Approach, *gently*

Complete avoidance of reminders can keep distress going. Many treatments for prolonged grief and trauma involve approaching reminders gradually, with support.

Connection and *meaning*

Company, and marking the day in a way that feels right to you, can help. There's no correct way to do it.

09 Looking back

complete after the day

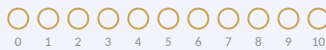
Before: how hard I expect it to be

rate in the lead-up



After: how hard it actually was

rate a day or two later



What helped most

Next time, I'd

To bring to my next session

SOURCES

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