



# A Year Later: Coping with the Anniversary of the Boston Marathon Bombings\*

Building a Healthy Boston

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## Tips for Coping during Anniversaries and Other Trigger Events

The first anniversary of the 2013 Boston Marathon tragedy may bring up many different emotions for survivors, loved ones of victims, and those who witnessed the event. While some of these emotions may be positive (gratitude for the help received that day and the outpouring of support and contributions worldwide), it is very normal and expected to experience feelings of distress about the event. Often, the first anniversary of a disaster is the hardest because there are so many unknowns regarding how to mark the event and what you will feel. Other events like birthdays and holidays may also trigger similar feelings of distress. It is important to know what to expect and how to manage your stress around anniversaries and other “trigger” events. Here are some tips for coping, how to recognize when you need help, and where to get help.

- **Be aware that special days may be difficult.** It's common for stress responses to come back around anniversary time, holidays, and special occasions. It is normal to have concerns and fears about how the anniversary or a special day will make you feel.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Be kind to yourself on anniversaries and special occasions. Understand that you may feel sad, angry, and anxious. These are all normal and expected responses. Acknowledge your feelings, and be aware that your emotions are likely connected to your losses and may not be aimed at anyone in particular.
- **Do what you want to do rather than what you think you should do.** There is no “right” or “wrong” way to spend an anniversary or special occasion. Don't feel like you have to act in a certain way and try not to put the needs of others before your own. Spend the day in a way that will be most helpful to you.
- **Accept kindness and help from others.** Support makes difficult times more bearable. There is often a tendency, though, to resist help from others. We may think that we don't need or deserve help as much as someone else and therefore shouldn't accept support. We may also not want to burden others. Anniversaries and special occasions, however, can be important times to open up and allow others to support you.
- **Talk about your losses only if you want to.** You may have a need to talk about your losses and how your life has changed since last year's marathon. Find someone who will listen and understand. Know that if you prefer to talk about the future rather than the past this is fine too. Do what is best for you. There is no need to talk about a distressing event unless *you* want to.
- **Do things to help you with your emotions.** There is no single way to feel on an anniversary or special day. Some people may feel nothing while others may cry or feel sad. People may also feel angry,

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irritable, confused, or uncertain of exactly what they are feeling. Regardless of *what* you are feeling, it is important to be aware of *how* you are feeling and to engage in activities that will help you during the day. Activities such as exercising, taking a walk, writing in a journal, and talking with family and friends can be helpful .

- **Draw on your faith/spirituality.** For many, faith and other spiritual beliefs are a source of strength and comfort during difficult times. Reach out to your faith advisor, spiritual community, or anyone that you feel comfortable talking with about your beliefs to support and console you.
- **Participate in rituals that may provide comfort, whatever they may be.** Sing, pray, go to the beach or a movie, share a meal, or go to a spiritual service. You may want to engage in a ritual alone as an opportunity for quiet solitude and reflection, or you may want to join with neighbors, friends, and family to find strength and comfort in coming together.
- **Helping others may help you.** If you are the type of person who gets satisfaction from helping others, you might want to think of small ways that you can be of help to others in need during difficult times. Helping can be as simple as going through your closet to find gently used clothing that might be of use to someone else.

## When to Seek Help

If self-help strategies are not working or you find you are using drugs and/or alcohol in order to cope, you may wish to seek professional assistance. Stress symptoms include:

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty maintaining balance
- Easily frustrated
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Limited attention span
- Poor work performance
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Tunnel vision/muffled hearing
- Colds or flu-like symptoms
- Disorientation or confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reluctance to leave home
- Depression, sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood swings
- Crying easily
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone

## Where to Call for Help

If you need help finding a counselor or a mental health clinician in Boston, call the Mayor's Health Line at 617-534-5050 or Toll-Free at 1-800-847-0710.