

Provider alert regarding reactions to the anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic

Actions Requested

- Support clients and patients who are experiencing despair or hopelessness, apathy or anger, and grief and loss. See the [Supporting Clients and Patients](#) section and [resources for providers](#) for more information.
- Share information and resources with clients, patients, and their families on building resilience, support strategies, mental and emotional well-being, and crisis support. See [resources for clients, patients, and families](#) for more information.

Background

Consistent with previous literature on disaster response and recovery cycles, the one-year anniversary after the initial impact of a disaster is typically a significant event for many in the affected population.¹ As the one-year anniversary of the initial social and economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic approaches for Washington residents in mid-March 2021, behavioral health related responses to this significant period will be widespread and varied.

Areas of concern include:

- Despair or hopelessness that the pandemic has continued this long and that we are still in it.
- Apathy or anger about ongoing restrictions and following public health guidelines a year (or more) after the initial outbreak/impact.
- Significant bereavement, grief, and loss reactions about what has been lost or changed (e.g., economically, socially, and personally).

Expressions of distress during this time will vary dramatically and may range from being very intense to almost nonexistent. Consistent with other types of disasters or critical incidents, the one-year

¹ Knight, A. & Liu, J. (2015, August 14). *Disaster Anniversaries*. [Presentation slides]. SAMHSA. https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/webcast_disaster_anniversaries.pdf

anniversary of the impact of an event can go unnoticed by some and is a main focus of attention or distress for others.^{1,2,3}

Supporting Clients and Patients³

For clients and patients who are experiencing despair or hopelessness:

- Normalize their reaction and validate that a year is a long time to be struggling through something this significant.
- Try to facilitate a space for them to process their experiences. Use active listening when possible.
- Reflect with them about a light at the end of the tunnel. Ask them to identify small improvements they have made in the last several months.
- Try to help them make the shift, mentally and emotionally, from seeing the pandemic as a *threat* to seeing it as a *challenge*. Challenges have pieces that can be overcome and can generate growth and resilience.

For clients and patients who are experiencing apathy or anger:

- Help them try to direct their attention and motivation towards something bigger than themselves. For example, sometimes it's easier to make healthy and safe choices when people are committed to helping others.
- Help them identify positive ways that they can contribute to the experience of others, if possible. For example, they could lend a hand or offer support to those around them who may have fewer resources.

For clients and patients who are experiencing grief and loss:

- Recognize that there are significant cultural, familial, and past experiences that affect how each of us experience loss and how we show grief.
- Stay focused on validating and listening to the griever.
- Validate conflicting emotions. It's okay to feel terrible loss and also relief at the same time.
- Facilitate problem solving and decision making to prevent impulsive or risky decisions (e.g., decisions related to precautionary health measures, burial of loved ones).
- Modify coping plans if traditional strategies aren't possible (e.g., gathering with family to grieve using a virtual meeting platform).
- Help them identify places of belonging, safe and positive relationships, and activities that are uplifting. This helps the person feel some control.

² Daly, E. S., Gulliver, S. B., Zimering, R. T., Kamholtz, B. W., & Morrissette, S. B. (2008). Disaster mental health workers responding to ground zero: One year later. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 21*(2), p. 227-239. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20311>

³ Nemeth, D. G., Kurianski, J., Reeder, K. P., Lewis, A., Marceaux, K., & Whittington, T. (2012). Addressing Anniversary Reactions of Trauma Through Group Process: The Hurricane Katrina Anniversary Wellness Workshops. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 62*(1). p. 129-142 <https://doi.org/10.1521/ijgp.2012.62.1.129>

- Provide psychoeducation about the grief and loss process, especially around the warning symptoms of complicated grief and trauma, such as symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder or major depressive disorder.

Resources

For Providers:

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**
 - Disaster Anniversary Presentation: [Slides](#) and [webcast recording](#)
- **Washington State Department of Health**
 - [Behavioral Health Group Impact Reference Guide](#): Describes behavioral health impacts and recommendations for some occupations and social roles that could be more heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Statewide High-Level Analysis of Forecasted Behavioral Health Impacts from COVID-19 – [January Update](#): Outlines the potential statewide behavioral health impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, monthly updates can be found on the [DOH Behavioral Health Resources and Recommendations webpage](#).

For Clients, Patients, and Families:

- **Washington State Coronavirus Response (COVID-19)**
 - [Mental and emotional well-being resources](#)
 - [Ingredients of resilience](#)
 - [Dealing with grief or loss](#)
 - [Suicide warning signs](#)
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**
 - [Anniversaries and Trigger Events](#)
 - [Coping Tips for Traumatic Events and Disasters](#)
- **Helplines**
 - [Mental health crisis lines](#)
 - [Washington Listens](#): Call 833-681-0211.
 - [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): Call 800-273-8255 (English) or 1-888-628-9454 (Spanish).
 - [Crisis Text Line](#): Text HEAL to 741741.
 - [Crisis Connections](#): Call 866-427-4747.
 - [Washington Warm Line](#): Call 877-500-9276.
 - [SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline](#): Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.
 - [Crisis lines for specific groups](#)
 - [TeenLink](#): Call or text 866-833-6546.