ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS: TRAUMA REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: This article is intended to acquaint the reader with a phenomena known in the psychoanalytic literature as “anniversary reactions.” Conceptualized as ensuing from incomplete forms of mourning, these reactions may be evident in various forms including somatic symptoms and diseases, depression, psychosis, suicide, and homicide on the anniversary date of a significant past traumatic event. This article identifies various manifestations of anniversary reactions and familiarizes the reader with some of the elements thought to constitute them: trauma, incomplete mourning, identification and an unconscious sense of time. A clinical vignette is presented and discussed.

In the course of our clinical work, whatever the setting, it is not unusual to encounter clients, both children and adults, who manifest what has been termed in the literature “anniversary reactions.” These phenomena, first mentioned by Freud (1895) and elaborated upon by such investigators as Hilgard and Newman (1959), Hilgard (1969), Pollock (1970, 1971), Mintz (1971), Haesler (1986) and Renvoise and Jain (1986) are conceptualized as a time specific psychological, somatic and/or behavioral response symbolizing attempts at mastery of trauma arising consciously or unconsciously on the anniversary of a significant past event, most often the death of a significant figure from childhood.

In the paragraphs to follow, attempts will be made to further clarify the nature and meaning of anniversary phenomena. Various theoretical concepts relating to anniversary reactions will be presented. A clinical vignette will be introduced and discussed in hopes of illustrating and further delineating the parameters of this concept. Finally, concluding remarks will be offered, focusing on the role such phenomena may play in our clinical practice.

Anniversary reactions as conceptualized in the clinical literature over the past four decades have been identified as forms of remembering which manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Specifically, anniversary reactions may present in the form of anniversary dreams (Lowry,
in accident-proneness (Seligman et al., 1971,72); in depressive reactions (Pollock, 1970); in psychosomatic reactions such as colds (Ruddick, 1963), lactation (Yazmajian, 1982), or in diseases such as ulcers (Rose, 1972) and colitis (Bressler, 1956; Minitz, 1971); in psychotic regression (Hilgard, 1953; Hilgard & Newman, 1959; Hilgard, 1969); through the re-enactments of traumatic events especially by children (Hilgard, 1969; Haesler, 1986) and in anniversary suicides and homicides (Pollock, 1975, 1976). More recent observations (Alderson, 1975 and Barraclough & Sheperd, 1976) on death and bereavement in some of the elderly suggest that time of death in elderly may often be determined by an anniversary such as the approach of one’s own birthday or at the time of a significant birth or death anniversary of a close relative.

The intense curiosity, eerie sense of déjà vu, as well as notions related to the haunting power of the past referred to by Chapman (1959) as “nemesis,” are stimulated by considerations of the anniversary phenomenon. It is a phenomenon whose capacity to capture attention extends beyond the “clinical” community, reaching into the domain of historical, literary and popular interest. Before turning to an in-depth clinical consideration of anniversary phenomenon it is both interesting and relevant to note a few of the historical, literary and popular references made to this phenomenon.

With regard to historical references, there is the event of Winston Churchill’s death precisely at the age and on the date of his father’s death years earlier, leading Inman (1967) to theorize that such an event symbolized a “wish to join the dead.” A tragic example of this phenomenon may be found in the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy by Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a Jordanian, on June 6, 1968. Sirhan’s plans as reported by Peter Khiss (New York Times, June 6, 1968) were to kill Kennedy before June 5, 1968, the date of the first anniversary of the six-day war in which Israel’s forces defeated the armies of Jordan.

A fascinating literary illustration appears in the biography of Marie Bonaparte (Bertin, 1982). Married to the King of Greece and the last of the Bonapartes, she became a disciple of Sigmund Freud and later a famous European analyst. Writing on the consequences of her mother’s death at the age of 22, which occurred shortly after her birth, Bonaparte recalled that at age 17 years she became convinced that she, like her mother, would die at the age of 22. She expected that she would die of TB, the same disease she believed to be the cause of her mother’s untimely death. Marie Bonaparte’s conviction that she was terminally ill expressed itself in symptoms mimicking TB. By the age of 20 her symptoms worsened and she appeared to observers to be wasting away. It was only subsequent to her 22nd birthday and the fact that she remained alive through that year that her symptoms diminished and eventually disappeared.