

focus on

Serious Injury Care

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Serious injury anniversary dates offer opportunities for individuals to reflect

Marking important dates – both happy and solemn – is an essential part of the human experience. We celebrate birthdays and wedding anniversaries, pay our respects on Remembrance Day, and revisit memories of loved ones who have passed away. We also have meaningful personal milestones. For someone who has been seriously injured, the anniversary date of the trauma can be significant.

To learn how people experience their anniversary date, Adrian Dieleman, chaplain at Hamilton Health Sciences hospital network in Hamilton, Ontario, and his research team interviewed 12 people who sustained spinal cord injuries at least two years ago. He presented their study, "Significance of the Anniversary Date of a Spinal Cord Injury," at the 15th Annual Interurban Spinal Cord Injury Conference last October.

Dieleman injured his spinal cord in 1987. "For me it has always been a significant day, especially in the early years. It was interesting to see how other people commemorate it. The study confirmed my hunch that it was a significant date for people," he explains.

Most of the study subjects feel that their anniversary date is important, and find themselves becoming more reflective when it comes up. Some return to the

location where the injury happened, some "vent" to friends and family, and others prefer to be alone.

Several people initially told the researchers that the date is insignificant or that they don't give it attention, but later described behaviours that indicate they observe it in some way (for example, visiting the injury site, refusing to leave the house and/or not liking when the date arrives).

The study uncovered several factors that influence how people perceive their anniversary date: how well they have adjusted to their injury (including the effects of personality and using humour to cope), how much time has elapsed since the injury (subjects are less anxious as years pass), and access to resources and supports.

The study also identified barriers that interfere with adjustment, including pain, financial concerns and negative supports (negative communications and actions from sources expected to be supportive, such as family members). Other barriers include health issues, problems with physical accessibility (transportation, buildings, weather), and psychological issues such as depression and loneliness.

Overall, the subjects view the original injury date as life-changing (positive, negative or both) and use the anniver-



Adrian Dieleman

saries to gauge their progress. "It's a spot for people to say, 'OK, here I am, it's been five years. Wow, I can't believe I'm here – when I was first injured, I didn't think I could do this and this,'" says Dieleman. "It's different for everybody, of course. In the beginning, I liked to be by myself a little more. I would stop during the day and just think about it. And now I don't need to stop as much."

Barry Munro, chairman of the Canadian Spinal Research Organization, also sustained a spinal cord injury in 1987, at age 23. He has seen the whole gamut of responses to anniversary dates. "There are a lot of people who haven't dealt with



their injury and might never,” he says. “They view that date as something bad happening to them. In the younger years, especially for the young risk-takers, the date is basically about getting all boozed up like New Year’s Eve – they’re fighting their demons. I know some people who are really having issues with their injury – they look at their anniversary date in a negative light, almost a mourning period.”

Anniversary dates are sometimes awkward for family members

People who have progressed and made accomplishments in spite of the challenges tend to acknowledge the date and move on. Munro says his response to his anniversary date has evolved. “In the early years, it was sort of like an Irish wake. You talk about it, recognize it, move on. You still think about it but don’t really recognize it per se. Now I would probably fit into the category of reflective – each year is another year past when I was able-bodied. As time goes by, the date is there, but it’s OK. Time heals, so to speak. It’s like the passing of somebody you love – that date is etched in my mind, and I have almost similar feelings about the injury sometimes. After a number of years, you don’t get upset – you just think about it. It’s there.”

Dieleman was surprised that several interviewees didn’t seem to feel as if they had permission to observe the day, even several years post-injury. “That came out when people said, ‘My family doesn’t call me on that day – they’re afraid to open up Pandora’s box, but I would love for them to say hi, and recognize that it’s there.’”

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he says. Dieleman suggests that family and friends acknowledge the date, be open to discussion and take their cues from the person with the injury. “He or she might want to go out and celebrate, or just be left alone, or talk about it or not talk about it. Everyone’s different,” he adds.

Health care staff can also play a helpful role. When an anniversary date comes up, personal support workers and others take direction from clients’ wishes. “For instance, the caregiver may observe that the client appears more depressed,” says Brenda Hunter, serious injury clinical consultant at Bayshore Home Health. “Perhaps the client wants to visit the accident scene or rehabilitation facility on his or her anniversary date. Our caregivers will try to support clients’ wishes to the best of their ability to help them cope.”

There is plenty of room for additional research. Dieleman says that he’d like to find out if there is a correlation between how well people have accepted their injury and how they commemorate the date. “It seems that the ones who dealt with the date in a healthier way were more accepting of what happened,” he adds. He notes that “healthier” is a subjective term, but it is better to reflect positively and talk to others about the date rather than engaging in unhealthy behaviours, such as drinking heavily or refusing to leave the house.

Dieleman is also curious about how people in other countries handle anniversary

dates, and he would like to know more about the effect of time. “It would be interesting to see if there is a difference from the first three years after an injury to year 20 or 25 – to see if things have mellowed out or are done differently,” he says.

Dieleman himself already has plans for a special anniversary date. “In two years, it’ll be 22 years since I’ve been hurt. I was 22 years old, so I will have spent half of my life in a chair,” he says. “There’s going to be a significant gearing-up for that time – I’m going to invite people who have been important to me in the past 22 years to a big dinner in a banquet hall, and have a celebration together.”

Most study subjects feel their anniversary date is important

Munro also says that the date that marks his having a disability for half his life will be an important milestone. He hopes that other people with injuries focus on how far they’ve come. “If you’re using the anniversary date as a chance to mark progress, that’s a positive thing, but you can’t dwell on ‘what if’ – what if I didn’t get into that car, or dive into that lake. People get down, and that’s dangerous. It is what it is. Recognize the day as another day you build on your adversity.”