



COPING WITH ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS AFTER SECTOR-WIDE LOSS AND CHANGE

*What to Expect Around the Anniversary of the 2025
Foreign Aid Freeze – and How to Support Yourself*

Significant dates can stir up powerful memories. Birthdays, the day we moved to a new country, the day a crisis began—or the day a major decision reshaped our work. These “anniversary reactions” are our mind and body’s way of remembering important events. Sometimes they come with gratitude, pride, or a bittersweet sense of how far we’ve come. At other times, they bring a resurgence of grief, anger, anxiety, or uncertainty.

For many people in the humanitarian and development sector, 20 January 2025 is one of those significant dates. The executive order pausing U.S. foreign development assistance, the months of uncertainty that followed, and the eventual dissolution of USAID had far-reaching consequences. Many experienced sudden job loss or major changes in their roles and organizations. Others saw long-standing programs close, partnerships unravel, and career paths they had invested in for years become uncertain.

The impact of the foreign aid freeze extended far beyond the humanitarian workforce. The freeze and subsequent cuts disrupted vital services for vulnerable communities around the world—people whose health and wellbeing depended on programming that was paused, scaled back, or lost entirely. For those in the sector, witnessing these ripple effects brought an added layer of helplessness, grief, anger, and moral distress.

As we approach a significant anniversary, it is common for reactions to surface— sometimes in the days or weeks leading up to the date, sometimes afterward. You may notice changes in mood, energy, sleep, or concentration. You might find yourself thinking more about what happened last year, worrying about the future of the sector, or questioning your own sense of identity and purpose in this work. None of this means you are “going backwards.” It is a normal response to a deeply impactful and stressful season.

This resource is designed to help you understand and navigate this time. Inside, you’ll find:

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COMMON ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS

Anniversary reactions can show up in many different ways. Some people notice only mild shifts in mood or energy; others experience strong emotional or physical responses that can be surprising, especially if they felt they had “moved on.” These reactions are normal responses to the body and mind remembering a time of upheaval, loss, and uncertainty, and they can also include unexpected feelings such as relief, pride in how you navigated the year, or gratitude for people who supported you. Mixed reactions are normal. Below are some common ways anniversary reactions may appear:

Emotional Reactions	Cognitive Reactions
A resurgence of sadness, grief, anger, helplessness, or anxiety Irritability, frustration, or feeling “on edge” A sense of dread or heaviness as the anniversary approaches Feeling emotionally raw, sensitive, or easily overwhelmed Renewed moral distress, especially when thinking about the impact on vulnerable communities Feeling disconnected from others or unusually withdrawn	Intrusive memories of stressful meetings, difficult decisions, or the moment you heard the news Rumination about how the year unfolded or worry about what the future holds Difficulty concentrating or staying focused Doubts about professional identity, purpose, or career direction Feeling “stuck” in remembering what was lost—jobs, teams, programs, or relationships
Physical Reactions	Behavioral Reactions
Changes in sleep—difficulty falling asleep, restless sleep, waking frequently Fatigue, low energy, or feeling physically run down Muscle tension, a tight chest, or headaches Stomach discomfort or digestive problems Restlessness or difficulty relaxing A noticeable increase or decrease in appetite	Withdrawning from colleagues or social activities Avoiding news content or conversations about the sector Overworking, overcommitting, or “pushing through” to avoid difficult feelings Trouble setting boundaries or switching off at the end of the day Seeking distractions—social media, screens, food, alcohol, or staying constantly busy
Meaning and Identity Reactions	
For many, the 2025 aid freeze represented more than professional disruption—it touched deeply held values, purpose, and hopes for global progress. Anniversary reactions may also include... Renewed grief about the human cost of lost programs Questions about meaning, impact, or calling A sense of disillusionment, cynicism, or loss of trust in institutions or governments A pull toward reconnecting with purpose in new or unexpected ways	

WHAT ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS ARE NOT

It can be unsettling when old feelings, worries, or physical symptoms resurface around a significant date. Naming what anniversary reactions *are not* can help reduce self-blame and keep these experiences in perspective.

Anniversary reactions are not:

→ **A sign that you're going backwards.**

Your progress and resilience over the past year are still real and intact.

→ **Evidence that you didn't cope well at the time.**

Strong reactions now don't mean you responded poorly then—they reflect how stressful and meaningful that period was.

→ **A personal failing or weakness.**

These reactions are a normal human response to remembering a difficult season of loss and uncertainty.

→ **A prediction about the year ahead.**

Feeling unsettled now does not mean the future will be the same as the past.

→ **Permanent.**

Anniversary reactions usually rise, crest, and subside. They tend to ease naturally once the anniversary passes.

If you experience anniversary reactions this year, it doesn't mean something is wrong with you—it means something significant happened, and your body and mind remember.

WAYS YOU CAN COPE WITH ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS

Anniversary reactions are normal—and usually temporary. They tend to ease after the anniversary passes, especially when you approach them with awareness and care. Below are practical ways to support yourself before, during, and after a difficult anniversary.

1. Acknowledge what's coming up for you

Often the most helpful first step is simply acknowledging the significance of the anniversary and noticing what you're feeling.

- Try naming your emotions: “I’m feeling grief,” “I’m tense,” “I’m anxious about what next year will bring.” Naming emotions reduces their intensity and helps your nervous system settle.
- Notice any physical signs—tight shoulders, fatigue, restlessness, difficulty sleeping.
- Remind yourself: This is a normal reaction to a difficult time, not a sign that you’re failing or going backwards.

2. Plan ahead for how you will spend the day

If you expect the anniversary to be challenging, plan ahead. Ask yourself “what do I need at this time?” Then decide in advance how and with whom you want to spend the day. It’s usually best to plan to spend at least part of the day with other people.:

- Consider limiting unnecessary meetings.
- If your commitments allow flexibility, consider starting your day later, ending earlier, or scheduling lighter tasks.

3. Be gentle with yourself

The days surrounding anniversaries often come with lowered energy, disrupted focus, or increased sensitivity. Remember that self-compassion is not indulgent—it is protective—and give yourself permission to:

- Simplify your to-do list
- Postpone non-essential tasks
- Build in more rest
- Loosen internal expectations about how productive or “together” you should feel

4. Create stability and predictability where you can

Periods of uncertainty—like those triggered by the 2025 aid freeze—undermine your sense of predictability and control. Anniversaries of these sorts of events can stir up that sense of uncertainty all over again. Limit extra commitments or last-minute additions to your schedule. Stick to simple rhythms and routines that can help you feel more grounded, and activities you find soothing and restorative.

5. Take care of yourself physically – sleep, eat, exercise

Did you know that being sleep deprived makes you much more vulnerable to feeling depressed and anxious? Take extra care during this time to try to get enough sleep, eat well, and get some exercise. Paying attention to these basics will help you cope better with any emotional ups and downs.

6. Protect yourself mentally and emotionally

In the days around the anniversary, you may find it helpful to:

- Reduce news consumption
- Avoid social media discussions about sector cuts or political developments
- Delay reading emotionally charged emails or reports unless necessary
- Limit the time you spend with people who drain or upset you

This is not denial or unhealthy avoidance—it is strategic boundary-setting during a sensitive time.

7. Connect with others and tell them it's a challenging time

Isolation tends to intensify distress. Let those around you know it is a charged season or a difficult time for you. Expressing this truth can help you. Hearing this truth can help others support you better and be more understanding if you act withdrawn, irritable, or depressed. Consider:

- Talking with a friend or colleague who lived through last year's changes
- Sharing that this anniversary is stirring things up for you
- Reaching out to friends or family who help you feel grounded and supported

You may also notice these reactions in colleagues or teams. Naming the anniversary gently can help normalize what others may also be feeling. If you're a manager or team lead, you may find it helpful to share this resource or check in with your team.

8. Reaffirm your values and honor meaningful achievements

Look for ways to seek out meaning, reaffirm your values, and honor positive memories and meaningful achievements. For many, the 2025 foreign aid freeze struck directly at purpose, identity, and core humanitarian values. During anniversaries, it can help to:

- Reflect on what still matters most to you
- Reconnect with the principles that guide your work and life
- Notice how you have adapted, grown, or persisted
- Acknowledge the difference your work, programs, teams, or partnerships made—even if they ended abruptly
- Do something to help someone else, make a donation, or volunteer some time to a related cause

9. Acknowledge progress and growth

Anniversary reactions can make you feel like you've been dragged back in time to when it happened. You may also feel depressed and defeated that you're dealing with these thoughts and feelings again after so much time has passed.

During this season, remind yourself that the progress you have made is real. It can help to pause, look back, and think about things like:

- How far you have come and the challenges you have surmounted—the courage, stamina, and resourcefulness you and loved ones have shown since the event.
- Family, friends, and others who have supported you during this time.
- Your hopes for the future.

10. Reach out for professional support if you need it

You may benefit from talking with a counselor, mental health professional, or Peer Support volunteer if:

- You feel overwhelmed
- Your reactions are interfering with work or daily life
- You're experiencing extended sleep disturbance, panic, or despair
- This anniversary brings up past trauma or loss

Support is there for moments like these—seeking it demonstrates strength, not weakness.

A FINAL NOTE

As the anniversary approaches, you may notice urges to swing toward extremes—working too hard, overcommitting, shutting down, withdrawing, or trying to stay constantly busy so you don't have to feel anything. These impulses are common during stressful anniversaries, and they are usually signs that your system is trying to protect you. When you notice them, pause and gently ask yourself: "What do I need right now—rest, structure, connection, clarity, or something else?" Even a few seconds of noticing and choosing can help interrupt unhelpful patterns and steer you toward something more supportive.

Remember that anniversary reactions, while often uncomfortable, are time-limited. They tend to rise, crest, and then settle again. Feeling waves of emotion, tension, or heaviness at this time does not mean you are back at the hardest part of last year. It means you are human, remembering a period that carried real loss, uncertainty, and meaning. Trust that the reaction will pass. In the meantime, taking small, intentional steps to care for yourself can help you move through this season with steadiness, compassion, and strength.

Ways to Cope with Anniversary Reactions

1. **Acknowledge what's coming up for you** – Notice your feelings and physical reactions without judging them.
2. **Plan ahead for how you will spend the day** – Choose what you need and who you want around you.
3. **Be gentle with yourself** – Lower expectations, simplify tasks, and give yourself extra room to breathe.
4. **Create stability and predictability where you can** – Lean on small routines and limit unnecessary commitments.
5. **Take care of yourself physically** – Prioritize sleep, nourishment, movement, and basic rhythms that support wellbeing.
6. **Protect yourself mentally and emotionally** – Reduce exposure to news, social media, or conversations that drain or distress you.
7. **Connect with others and tell them it's a challenging time** – Reach out for support and let people know what you're navigating.
8. **Reaffirm your values and honor meaningful achievements** – Reflect on what matters most and the difference you've made.
9. **Acknowledge progress and growth** – Remember how far you've come and the strengths you've drawn on over the past year.
10. **Reach out for professional support if you need it** – Seek counseling or staff support resources if the anniversary feels overwhelming or you're experiencing intense reactions that persist.

ABOUT KONTERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: info@konterragroup.net.