



HELPING STAFF COPE WITH ANNIVERSARY REACTIONS

A Guide for Managers

2025 Foreign Aid Freeze



KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

Significant dates can stir up powerful memories. The anniversary of a crisis or loss can stir up a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and memories. These “anniversary reactions” are our mind and body’s way of remembering events that had a deep impact on us. Sometimes they come with a sense of progress or gratitude. Other times, they bring a resurgence of grief, anger, anxiety, or uncertainty.

For many in the humanitarian and development sector, 20 January 2025 is one of those dates. The executive order pausing U.S. foreign development assistance—and the months of instability and eventual dissolution of USAID that followed—reshaped careers, organizations, and long-standing partnerships. Staff faced sudden job changes or losses, stalled programming, and shifts in purpose and identity. They also carried the emotional weight of disrupted services for vulnerable communities, and the grief, anger, and moral distress that came with seeing those ripple effects unfold.

As we approach a significant anniversary, it is common for reactions to surface — sometimes subtly, sometimes unexpectedly. Not everyone will experience this “anniversary effect.” But those who do may notice changes in mood, energy, sleep, or concentration, or find themselves revisiting memories of that uncertain period. These responses are normal, and they can happen even when the people experiencing them do not realize or acknowledge the effect the anniversary is having upon them.

As a manager...

Your primary role as a manager is to manage. While this includes supporting your staff, there are limits to the type of support you can reasonably offer. It is not your job to alter someone’s reactions, solve their personal problems, or make their pain disappear.

However, you can help by:

- Learning about anniversary reactions so you know what to watch for
- Asking how staff are going
- Listening well
- Offering flexibility and other support during challenging times
- Calling for professional assistance for yourself or your staff if needed

Inside this resource, you’ll find guidance to help you recognize anniversary reactions, support staff through this period, and know when additional help may be needed.

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WHY THIS ANNIVERSARY MATTERS

The events set in motion on 20 January 2025 were not a single moment but the beginning of a prolonged period of uncertainty, disruption, and loss. For many staff, the anniversary may activate memories of:

- **Sudden instability** in their roles, organizations, or long-term career paths
- **Concerns for partners and communities** whose programs were paused, reduced, or lost
- **Difficult transitions**, including changes in job responsibilities, team structures, funding streams, or career path
- **Personal stressors**, such as fears about job security, relocations, or supporting family through uncertainty
- **Moral distress or grief** over the impact on people they serve

Anniversary reactions often arise not only from the event itself, but also from the **emotional climate surrounding it**—the sense of unpredictability, lack of control, and rapid change. Even if you feel circumstances appear more stable, staff may still carry unresolved stress or ongoing worry about the future of the sector.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN THE WORKPLACE

People will respond to the anniversary of a distressing or disruptive period in different ways. Some may feel relatively unaffected. Others may experience renewed anxiety, grief, irritability, or distraction—even if they handled last year’s challenges with strength and adaptability. These reactions can be subtle or noticeable, short-lived or present for several days.

Below are signs that a staff member may be experiencing an anniversary reaction:

- They bring up the events surrounding the aid freeze more often, or express renewed worry about job stability, program continuity, or sector changes.
- They follow news coverage or sector updates intensely, in a way that seems to heighten stress.
- They seem unusually withdrawn, subdued, or distracted for more than a day or two.
- They appear more irritable, tense, or reactive and may become involved in conflicts or misunderstandings.
- They are struggling to concentrate, making uncharacteristic mistakes, or showing changes in decision-making.
- They report sleep disturbances, low energy, or headaches.
- They express guilt, shame, or a sense of helplessness, especially related to last year’s program closures or community impact.
- You notice tardiness, unplanned absences, or a temporary dip in work quality or motivation.

Not everyone who is affected will talk openly about how they are feeling. Some may not immediately link their experience to the anniversary at all. Managers who stay attentive to changes in behavior, tone, and energy are better positioned to offer gentle support and appropriate flexibility.

HOW MANAGERS CAN OFFER SUPPORT DURING THE ANNIVERSARY PERIOD

As a manager, you are not expected to “fix” anniversary reactions, but your presence, tone, and messaging can make a significant difference. During this period, staff often benefit most from steady leadership and small adjustments that signal support and reduce pressure. The actions below can help you support your team while maintaining healthy boundaries and clarity around your role.

1. Acknowledge the Anniversary Thoughtfully

You do not need to make a major announcement, but a simple, humane acknowledgment signals that you understand this may be a sensitive time. It also helps normalize reactions for staff who may be struggling privately.

You might say something like:

“I know this time of year may bring up some memories or stress for people, given everything that happened last January. If it’s affecting you, please know you’re not alone, and let me know if you need some flexibility or support.”

A brief recognition—whether in a team meeting, an email, or 1:1 conversations—can reduce the sense of isolation or self-doubt that often accompanies anniversary reactions.

2. Check In With Staff and Listen Well

Gentle curiosity goes a long way. Keep your questions simple and open-ended:

“How are you doing this week?”
“Is there anything that would help make the next few days easier?”
“What’s your capacity like right now?”

You don’t need to probe or ask for personal details. Your role is to create space for staff to share what might be affecting their work and what support would be useful. Listening calmly—without minimizing or rushing to reassure—helps people feel steadier and more able to regulate their own reactions.

3. Offer Helpful Information that Normalizes Reactions

Some staff may not immediately recognize that what they're experiencing relates to the anniversary. You can help by sharing the tips sheet on why anniversary reactions happen and what can help, and letting them know that anniversary reactions are common.

Providing clear, accessible information can reduce self-blame, help staff feel less alone, and give them practical tools without requiring a manager to take on the role of counselor.

4. Provide Predictability and Reduce Unnecessary Stressors

During anniversary periods, predictability helps staff regain a sense of stability and control. Consider:

- Clarifying priorities for the week or two around the anniversary
- Highlighting what is *not* urgent
- Avoiding new initiatives or non-essential deadlines where possible
- Keeping communication clear and consistent to limit uncertainty

Even small adjustments can reduce cognitive load and prevent minor stressors from compounding.

5. Offer Flexibility Where Possible

Temporary flexibility can help staff manage increased emotional or cognitive strain. Options may include:

- Adjusting deadlines
- Allowing leave or shortened workdays
- Lightening non-essential tasks
- Reducing meeting load
- Offering the option to work from a quieter location or from home, if appropriate

These changes do not need to be large or long term. Short-term flexibility can help staff regain balance and maintain performance across the broader period.

6. Reassure Staff About Short-Term Changes in Performance

Some staff may worry that feeling more emotional, distracted, or tired will be judged harshly or affect their job security—especially given the upheaval of the past year.

You can help by reinforcing that:

- Anniversary reactions are **temporary**
- Feeling more stressed or reactive for a few days is **common**
- A short-term dip in concentration or energy does **not** reflect their value or long-term capacity

Simple reassurance can reduce secondary stress—the stress caused not by the reaction itself, but by fear about how it will be perceived.

7. Create Space for Team Connection

Connection can buffer stress and remind staff they are not alone. Consider:

- Opening meetings with a brief check-in
- Creating space for staff to share how the week is going (only if they want to)
- Encouraging peer support and kindness within the team
- Acknowledging collective accomplishments or growth

These small relational moments support morale without requiring staff to disclose anything personal.

8. Know When and How to Encourage Additional Support

If a staff member appears significantly distressed, if the reaction is prolonged, or if you feel out of your depth, encourage them to seek additional support. You might say:

“It sounds like this is hitting you quite hard. It might help to talk to someone who can support you through this. Would you like help connecting to our counseling resources?”

You do not need to diagnose or interpret someone’s experience. Your role is to notice, offer support, and connect staff to appropriate resources when needed.

9. Take Care of Yourself as a Manager

Managers also lived through last year's instability—and may have their own anniversary reactions. Supporting others is easier when you are also paying attention to your own stress levels, rest, boundaries, and workload. If your reactions feel strong, consider seeking support through trusted colleagues, peers, or available professional channels.

WHAT MANAGERS ARE *NOT* EXPECTED TO DO

Supporting staff through an anniversary period does not mean taking on the role of counselor or fixing their emotional responses. There are clear limits to the support managers should offer, and staying within those limits helps maintain healthy boundaries for everyone.

Managers are not expected to:

- Alter or resolve someone's emotional reactions
- Provide therapy, long-term emotional support, or crisis intervention
- Investigate personal details that staff do not wish to share
- Promise certainty about funding, job security, or the sector's future
- Take responsibility for solving systemic or organizational challenges
- Prevent all distress or difficult feelings
- Carry staff members' emotional burdens on their own

It is enough—and fully appropriate—for managers to **notice, listen, offer reasonable flexibility, and connect staff to additional support when needed.**

WHEN ADDITIONAL SUPPORT MAY BE NEEDED

Most anniversary reactions are temporary and ease within a few days or weeks. However, some staff may experience a stronger impact than expected or find that their reactions are interfering with daily functioning. In these situations, additional support can be helpful.

You may consider encouraging further support if you notice:

- Distress that seems to be **intensifying** rather than easing
- A **sustained drop** in concentration, motivation, or work quality

- Marked **withdrawal** from colleagues or usual routines
- Frequent expressions of **hopelessness, guilt, or helplessness**
- Persistent **sleep difficulties**, exhaustion, or heightened irritability
- Signs that the staff member is **overwhelmed** or struggling to cope despite your reasonable support

If you feel uncertain about how to respond, trust that instinct. You don't need to diagnose or even fully understand the problem—just connect the staff member with appropriate support.

Encourage the staff member to reach out through available resources, such as organizational counseling services, employee assistance programs, peer support networks, or other designated support channels. You might say:

"It seems like this has been really tough for you. It might help to talk with one of our counselors or support services. Would you like help getting connected?"

If someone expresses concerns about their safety or shows signs of significant distress, follow your organization's established procedures for seeking urgent support.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Anniversary reactions are a natural human response to events that carried uncertainty, loss, disruption, or deep emotional significance. This period may stir up memories for many people across the humanitarian and development sector — including managers themselves. You are not expected to remove these reactions or to have perfect answers.

What makes the greatest difference is simply showing up with steadiness, empathy, and clarity. Small actions — checking in, normalizing reactions, offering flexibility, and providing clear information — can help staff navigate this period with less fear and more grounding.

Your role is to support, not to solve. And by staying attentive to your own wellbeing as well as your team's, you contribute to a healthier, more resilient workplace during a time that may feel emotionally charged for many.

If you or your staff need additional support, please reach out to the internal services available within your organization.

QUICK REFERENCE

SUPPORTING STAFF AROUND THE ANNIVERSARY

What to Remember

- **Anniversary reactions are common and temporary.**
- Not everyone will be affected but, for some, **emotions may feel stronger or more unpredictable.**
- **Your job is to support**, not to provide counseling or fix the reaction.

What You Can Do

1. **Acknowledge the anniversary** in a simple, compassionate way.
2. **Check in with staff** and listen without judgment.
3. **Share the tips sheet** on anniversary reactions to normalize what they may be experiencing.
4. **Offer predictability** by clarifying priorities and reducing unnecessary pressures.
5. **Give flexibility** with deadlines, leave, or workload where appropriate.
6. **Reassure staff** about temporary changes in performance or emotional responses.
7. **Encourage team connection** through brief check-ins or supportive conversations.
8. **Suggest additional support** if reactions seem prolonged or overwhelming.
9. **Take care of yourself** – managers may feel the impact of this anniversary as well.

Manager Checklist: Before, During, and After the Anniversary

Before the Anniversary

Acknowledge the upcoming date (briefly and appropriately).

Clarify expectations and identify what can be de-prioritized.

Share the tips sheet with individuals or the whole team.

Plan for any necessary flexibility or workload adjustments.

Notice which staff may seem more tense, tired, or withdrawn.

During the Anniversary Week

Check in with staff individually or as a team.

Offer flexibility where possible (deadlines, hours, workload).

Keep communication steady and predictable.

Reassure staff about temporary changes in performance.

Pay attention to any notable changes in mood, behavior, or engagement.

After the Anniversary

Follow up with anyone who appeared strongly affected.

Make note of ongoing concerns that may benefit from additional support.

Encourage use of organizational counseling or staff-care resources if needed.

Take a moment to check in with yourself and access support if you need it.

You do not need to diagnose or solve the problem. Your role is to notice, support, and help staff connect with resources designed to assist them.

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.