

Coping with flashbacks

What is a flashback?

A flashback is a dissociated memory that returns to consciousness. It might be a smell, a taste, a sound, an image, an emotion, or a combination of these things. It might last a moment or linger on for weeks.

Flashbacks can be described in many different ways. Some people describe flashbacks as being like nightmares that happen to you while you are awake, remembering memories, or re-experiencing the assault. Sometimes people describe smelling alcohol or perfume when there is no one present, hearing a word over and over again in their heads, feeling panic or dread for no logical reason, or seeing pictures, like snapshots or a movie in their head.

Whatever term you use to describe them, they are usually very frightening experiences. This information is for people who are experiencing flashbacks, so that they might use the information to help understand and hopefully reduce/control flashbacks.

Experiencing flashbacks *does not mean that you are losing your mind*. It means that you are *at a point in your life where you are able to deal with things that perhaps you couldn't cope with earlier*. Flashbacks tend to lose their intensity once you have assembled the fragments into a coherent memory, talked about it, cried about it, and absorbed the memory into your life.

The flashbacks you are experiencing are only memories. They cannot hurt you and you are not being re-abused. You may feel powerless because you cannot control when these memories are going to emerge. But you do have control over how you feel afterwards. You may experience a wide range of emotions. Acknowledge them and allow yourself to feel them (even though this may seem painful).

Take some time to recover from flashbacks and look after yourself. By looking after yourself you are acknowledging that you are a good person worthy of nice things. Whatever you choose to do, take some time out for yourself.

Strategies for dealing with flashbacks

Try to relax. Although this is difficult, trying to relax reduces the stress that accompanies the flashback and usually means the flashback will pass more quickly

Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly. Sometimes when people are stressed they forget to breathe, and they freeze up. When this happens it is easier for the flashback to take hold of you. Focusing on breathing helps to free you from 'freezing up' and also provides a distraction from the flashback.

Remind yourself that the abuse is not happening now. You are remembering the abuse, and that can be painful, but it is still memory and not occurring right now

Find a safe place. This may be somewhere in your house, school, work, garden etc. Try to concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply while you are getting there

Seek out a support person, someone you feel safe with

Imagine a safe place. This can be anywhere or anything that helps you feel safe. You could use a photograph, draw or write it down before a flashback occurs, so that you can have it ready and refer to it

Remember positive encouragements from your support people. Imagine the person is there with you, encouraging you. Think of what they would say to you to help you feel stronger

Touch or hold something to ground you in the present moment, instead of feeling pulled into the past where the abuse occurred. This could be a table, a chair or a pillow etc

Hold onto a soft toy or an object that helps you feel safe/comforted

Use the flashback protocol. With practice this may help to reduce further flashbacks

You might find it useful to talk to other people you trust about it. This could be talking to a close friend, your counsellor, or even writing about it. This helps to acknowledge that although you suffered alone when you were abused, you don't need to be on your own when you are healing from it

Flashback protocol*

This protocol can be used to help halt traumatic flashbacks and ground you in the present by reconciling experiencing self with observing self. With practice, this may help to reduce the occurrence of further flashbacks.

“Right now I am *feeling* _____

(name the current emotion, for example ‘fear’)

and I am *sensing* in my body _____

(describe, in detail, the current bodily sensation)

Because I am *remembering* _____

(name the trauma, no details)

and, *at the same time*, I am looking around where I am now in _____

(say the year)

here _____

(name the place where you are right now)

and I can see _____

(describe some things that you can see right now)

and so I know _____

(name the trauma again)

is not happening now/anymore”

*Adapted from Rothschild, B (2000). The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment. New York: W.W.Norton