

Understanding and Managing Flashbacks

What are Flashbacks?

Flashbacks are vivid, intrusive memories of past trauma that feel as though the event is happening again in the present. They can involve images, sounds, smells, sensations, and/or tastes.

Flashbacks can be frightening, unpredictable, and disruptive to daily life. You might notice that some places, people or situations can trigger a flashback or you might find that flashbacks seem to happen at random. Flashbacks can last for just a few seconds, or continue for several hours or even days.

Important Things to Remember:

- Flashbacks are a common response to a traumatic event. You are not going crazy.
- The flashbacks you are experiencing are only memories. They cannot hurt you and you are not going through the trauma again.
- The trauma was not your fault.
- It is possible for you to recover from your trauma experiences, to feel good, and to lead a happy life.
- You don't have to go through this alone, there are people who can help.
- There are some things you can do that can help you manage these reminders of the trauma.

Strategies for Managing Flashbacks

1. Flashback protocol

Saying these statements (out loud if possible) will help you acknowledge your feelings and ground you in the present.

- Right now, I'm feeling (describe your emotions, for example fear).
- I'm sensing in my body (describe your bodily sensations, for example nausea or butterflies in my stomach).
- Because I'm remembering (name the trauma only- do not go into details).
- I am looking around where I am now, in (the place you are now and the month and year).
- I can see (describe some things you can see now).
- So, I know (name the trauma again) is not happening anymore.

2. Grounding techniques

Grounding techniques can help bring you back to the present and cope with flashbacks.

- Say out loud what you are experiencing as you check in with each of your senses:
 - **Smell:** What can you smell? Pick up something that you like and smell it deeply. A soothing smell is the fastest way to signal calm and safety to your nervous system.
 - **Touch:** What can you touch around you? How does the chair you are sitting on or the clothes on your body feel? Hold a warm cup of tea in your hands or a cold bottle against your face. Notice the sensations.
 - **Sight:** What can you see around you? Say out loud what you can see. Describe it in detail – the colours, the shapes, the objects.

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- **Taste:** Can you taste anything? Say out loud what the last thing you ate tasted like. Describe it in detail – was it sweet? Sour? Did you like it?
- **Sound:** What can you hear? Describe in detail what you can hear – is it traffic? Birds? Your own breathing? People talking?
- Carry an object that reminds you of the present. Some people find it helpful to touch or look at a particular object during a flashback. This might be something you decide to carry in your pocket or bag, or something that you have with you anyway, such as a keyring or a piece of jewellery.
- It is important to remind yourself that you are safe now and that you are not reliving the trauma, no matter how bad it feels. You can say things like “I am safe now” or “what happened is over” out loud to reassure yourself.

3. Breathing techniques

When you are frightened, you might stop breathing normally which increases feelings of fear and panic, so it can help to concentrate on regulating your breathing.

- Breathe in silently through your nose for a count of 4.
- After breathing in, hold your breath for a count of 7.
- Breathe out forcefully through your mouth for a count of 8, making a 'whoosh' sound as you let the air out.

4. Other helpful actions

- Be kind to yourself. Allow your feelings and reactions without being angry or upset at yourself.
- Say coping statements to yourself. For example, “I can deal with this” or “these difficult feelings will pass.”
- 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.
- 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 refer to it.
- After the flashback is over, try to understand it. Perhaps write it down or talk about it with a trusted friend or a counsellor.
- Reach out for support: Don’t be afraid to reach out for support from friends, family, or a mental health professional when you are experiencing flashbacks. They can provide you with emotional support and help you to cope with the difficult feelings that may arise.