

What is a flashback?

Flashbacks are memories of past events that are experienced so vividly that they can feel like the event is happening again and that the threat and the fear is real and present. Because our brains deal with trauma memories in a different way to everyday memories, current situations or events may trigger a 'flashback' where we re-experience the traumatic event as if it is happening right now. These memories have become stored as sensory and emotional memories in the amygdala in the brain, rather than being processed and timestamped in the hippocampus. At the time it was helpful for us to be in a state of alertness so that we are prepared for danger, so our brains have learned to make us alert again if we come across any reminders of that danger. This can be very frightening, but is a normal response to trauma. These reminders might include images, tastes, smells, sounds, or emotions. This can include emotional flashbacks, where people may very powerfully and suddenly experience heightened feeling states when something occurs in their current lives that remind them of earlier emotions related to trauma or abuse (this may include fear, despair or shame). These very intense emotions can have a profound impact on how the person views themselves and others and learning to recognise these as emotional flashbacks can help to make sense of where these feelings have originated from.

There is a sliding scale of how people may have differing levels of awareness about thoughts, memories and flashbacks of things that have happened to them. It can be helpful to identify what you are experiencing as a point on this scale and to begin to increase your awareness of your surroundings and thoughts. Sometimes only certain parts of the memory or emotion can get activated, which can be confusing (eg only the feeling is triggered, not what was happening).



What can help to cope with flashbacks?

- **Recognise you are having a flashback.** Say to yourself that you are having a flashback and that what you are experiencing belongs to things that have happened to you in the past and that these things cannot hurt you now.
- **Grounding Techniques** may be helpful to orientate you in the present and to remind yourself that you are here now. Splash your face with cold water. Try describing your surroundings and notice what you can see. It might help to say this aloud. Count objects that are different colours.
- **Movement.** Moving can also be a helpful way to come back into your body as when we are overwhelmed we can become immobilised. Simply standing up or walking around can have an immediate impact on our physiology and bring us back into our bodies.

- **Focus on your breathing.** When we are frightened, we naturally speed up our breathing or may hold our breath. This is to help us take in oxygen to cope with what we are facing. Consciously slowing your breathing can help to calm our body's threat response. Imagine there is a balloon in your stomach that you are trying to inflate when you breathe in. This can help us to take deeper breaths. Focus on counting slowly (inhale for 4, hold for 5 and exhale for 7).
- **Ask your body to relax.** You may notice that when you are afraid you become very tense. Gently scan your body for tension and encourage your muscles to relax.
- **Self-soothing activities.** Wrap yourself in blanket, stroke a pet or soft toy. Listen to calming and relaxing music. Light a scented candle. It may help to think in advance about having a self-soothing kit so that you can use these when you need them.
- **Be patient and kind to yourself.** It takes times to recover from trauma and to reduce the intensity and frequency of flashbacks. Don't beat yourself up for feeling distressed. This is because distressing things have happened to you that your mind and body is still trying to process.
- **Allow yourself to grieve.** Flashbacks can help express old feelings of fear, hurt and abandonment and to validate the sense of helplessness and hopelessness that you felt at the time.

Further reading and useful resources:

The PODS website (Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors) has a wealth of information, articles and resources relating to trauma, dissociation and flashbacks. You can access this at www.pods-online.org.uk/

This website also has some useful suggestions about coping with flashbacks:

www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/CopingwithFlashbacks.pdf

Walker, P. (2013). *Complex PTSD: From surviving to thriving*. San Francisco: Createspace publishers.

Understanding your flashbacks and identifying triggers

Understanding what might be a trigger for you can help you to learn about your flashbacks and what might help. It can also be useful to identify what you are flashing back to. The more information you have about your flashbacks, the more you can learn to understand and manage them differently.

Describe where you were when the flashback happened. Pay attention to about what time of day it was, your surroundings and who you were with.

How intense was the flashback? What senses did this involve (eg smell, touch, taste, sound). Was it an emotional flashback?

Describe the content of the flashback.

Try to identify what memory or experience you were flashing back to. Remind yourself this is the past and not happening now.

What coping strategies did you try. Did they help?