

Coping With Flashbacks

When you have experienced a traumatic incident, such as sexual abuse or rape, the shock can be long lasting and have a profound emotional and physical impact. Flashbacks are an understandable reaction to trauma and are a common part of post-traumatic stress. How you cope with traumatic experiences will be personal to you and depends on many factors. It might comfort you to know that there are many things you can do that can help you cope with, or reduce, flashbacks.

What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are involuntary memories that can occur at any time, they feel incredibly real and vivid, as though you are reliving aspects of the trauma. Flashbacks can be multi-sensory, you might see images, hear sounds and experience tastes, smells and touch. You can also feel the same physical sensations, pain, and emotions as you did during the trauma. Flashbacks can occur when emotions are high and you're experiencing a sudden surge of feelings.

Why do I get flashbacks?

Our brains often protect us from harm, including painful things that we're not yet ready to deal with. Distressing memories can be buried, for weeks, months or even years. When you've survived something traumatic and overwhelming, reliving that experience through flashbacks can indicate that you're more ready to deal with, process and gain control over the memories.

Although flashbacks are memories of something in the past, you will feel as though the trauma is happening over again.

Developing tools to bring you back to the present can bring back a sense of calm and control.

Recognise the flashback. Tell yourself that this is a flashback, this isn't really happening now, it's a memory of something you have already survived.

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Use your senses. Connect with the present moment using your senses: touch, sight, sound, smell, taste. Feel what's around you, tell yourself what's different about this place, the different clothes you're wearing, the different people you're with. You could write a list of the things you can see, then the things you can touch and hear.

Hold something that grounds you. It could be a stone, a toy, a photo, anything. Try to bring yourself back to the present, the here and now.

Use breathing exercises. Breathing can control the feelings of panic you might have during a flashback. It could help you to focus on something very physical and in the present. Concentrate on deep breaths; focus on filling your lungs with air, breathe in to a count of 7 and breathe out to a count of 11. Even when you feel you've let all the air out, see if you can push out a last bit of breath. Repeat. Focusing on slowing down your breathing can calm your heart rate down and increase feelings of control.

Talk to people. Coping with flashbacks can feel very isolating, it can help when those around you know this is something that affects you. Other people can help to remind you of where you are and offer calming responses. You might prefer to be alone whilst experiencing a flashback, although afterwards you might want to talk to your friends and family about what you went through.

Give yourself some quiet time and self-care. Flashbacks are powerful and often exhausting experiences. Do anything to show compassion to yourself. Take a nap, go for a gentle stroll, anything that soothes and nurtures you. Be kind and patient with yourself.

Outside of the intensity of a flashback, it can help to challenge negative and critical thoughts. Identify these thoughts (i.e. 'I'm to blame', 'I can't cope'), and recognise them as being negative and self-critical. During distressing periods we often filter out positive thoughts, only focusing on the negative.

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Regain control over your thinking and actively focus on any aspect of your life that is good. Think of your fondest memory, listen to your favourite music, watch something that makes you laugh, look at photos that make you smile. Spending time with loved ones can make us feel better, even if we don't feel like mixing with others at first. A regular sleeping pattern is also healthy for the mind, as over-tiredness and exhaustion can intensify anxiety and stress. Seeking support from organisations which understand flashbacks, and the other impacts of sexual violence and abuse, can also help.

Useful links:

Mindfulness and meditation exercises are one way of calming the mind and helping us stay in the present moment. Headspace provides short guided meditations, including specific topics e.g. stress, sleep and anxiety. For more information on Headspace visit: www.headspace.com

Practicing Mindfulness has ideas to “Quiet the Mind” and other mindfulness and stress reducing “Exercises.” Visit: www.practicingmindfulness.com

Grounding can help you gain distance from your thoughts, feelings, and memories and bring you back to the present moment.

This exercise is written by people with lived experiences and could help to teach you grounding.

<http://cwmtaf.wales/Docs/Stabilisation%20Pack/Self-Help/Grounding.pdf>

Other general ideas for coping with flashbacks can be found on the Self Injury Support website: www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/help-and-support-with-self-injury/self-injury-self-help-ideas/ideas-for-coping-with-flashbacks/

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You don't need to deal with the effects of sexual violence, rape or sexual abuse alone. RSVP are here to support and enable you to live a life with hope and confidence, which is free from future abuse.

We offer:

- Specialist counselling for survivors and their supporters
- Independent sexual violence advocates (ISVAS) to assist you through criminal or civil proceedings, or in crisis, whether you have reported or not.
- Social groups and coffee mornings focusing on self-help
- Emotional support on our helpline 0121 643 4136

These are just some of our services. To find out more ways we can support you contact:-

☎ 0121 643 0301

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@ www.rsvporg.co.uk/services

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"My counsellor has given me the means by which I can face whatever yet may come."

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