

Coping & Healing

Healing from the effects of sexualized violence can be difficult, but not impossible. Survivors of sexualized violence have reported that using the following strategies has helped them process their trauma and begin to move forward:

- Telling someone about their abuse experience, whether it be a friend or a therapist, is a key to beginning the healing process
- Solid, supportive therapy, to help build up self-esteem and individual empowerment
- Entering into a very trusting relationship with another person
- Writing: journaling or poetry
- Reading: daily meditations and/or the stories of other survivors
- Drawing or painting
- Joining organizations, communities, or online groups of other survivors
- Developing a spiritual life
- Finding comfort in religion / spirituality / faith / culture
- Physical activities such as exercise, dancing, yoga, tai chi, karate, etc.
- Meditating

This list is certainly not all of the coping strategies that exist, but may give you an idea of where to start!

What strategies work for you?

Many survivors find it difficult to cope with the flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, and fear that may result from abuse. Below are some strategies that you can use to ground yourself when you are experiencing these symptoms. They can help you heal by keeping you in the moment and creating a sense of safety for you. At a later time, when you are feeling safe, a counselor can help you to address the feelings that are bringing on these symptoms. You may find that some of these suggestions work easier for you than others. Use the ones you like, and leave the rest. No one suggestion will work for every person. It takes hard work to learn to cope with these feelings, but you are capable of understanding them.

Grounding: Grounding is the process in which you bring your awareness to the present moment when you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or having a flashback. The following are some examples of grounding strategies:

- Breathe: Breathe in and out slowly and from your stomach, not your upper chest. Count to 4 as you breathe in and again as you breathe out
- Move vigorously (jump up and down, stomp your feet, go for a run/walk, exercise)
- Feel your arms, legs, and torso – squeeze to bring awareness to them
- Hold onto a safety object – find an object that reminds you of a time you felt safe, calm, peaceful, and happy; observe it's features and the memories associated with it
- Tell yourself, "This is not happening now. This happened in the past. It is just a memory. I am safe now."
- Distract the mind: doodling, writing, art, coloring, knitting, or any variety of keeping the hands busy

Engaging your **senses** is a great way to ground yourself. Try some of these techniques:

- Sound: turn on some music or a TV show that you love
- Scent: smell essential oils, or your favorite perfume
- Taste: eat something with a strong flavor, like a mint or dark chocolate
- Touch: hold an ice cube in your hand
- Sight: count colors, shapes, or name objects you can see around you

When experiencing a flashback, our brains believe that we are back in a scary moment even if we are safe right now. It is important to bring ourselves back to the present moment and space we are in. Try these exercises:

- **5 Senses Exercise:**
 - What are 5 things you can see right now?
 - What are 4 things you can feel right now?
 - What are 3 things you can hear right now?
 - What are 2 things you can smell or taste right now?
 - What is the day, month, and year right now?
- **Noticing Differences:**
 - Look around yourself. What color is the carpet? What does the room look like? What is the date today? Are you in your own house? Are you alone, or with a loved one? Look for things that will help you to focus on the fact that you are not currently in danger and that the memory you are having is a memory, not something that is happening to you now.
- **Journaling:** After you have grounded yourself from a flashback, journaling about the experience of having a flashback can help ground you in the present and identify what is triggering you or patterns in your triggers and emotions. Use these prompts as a guide to your journaling:
 - When have you felt this way before?
 - How is your present situation similar to the situation you are remembering? Did a person remind you of someone that was involved in your trauma in the past? A smell? Touch? Sight? Time of year? Age of your child?
 - What about your current situation is different from the situation that you are remembering? Your age? Your level of safety? Your support system? Different people in your life?

- o What is something that you can do now to help you feel safe and settled?

Recognizing Triggers

- Make a list of triggers that you already know of. Do certain smells, sights, sounds, feelings, physical sensations, places, or situations cause you to feel hyper-aroused and/or have memories to the trauma?
- After a flashback, when you are safely able to (maybe with a counsellor or safe person), try to think about what happened immediately before you felt triggered. Are you noticing that similar situations or sensations seem to bring on flashbacks? Write these down so you can begin to recognize patterns (see journaling, above).
- As you begin to figure out your triggers, start to think about how you react to the triggers?
- The more you are aware of your triggers and the ways that you react, the more you can begin to lessen the impact they have on you.

Safe Places

- Safe places can be imaginary or real. It is important to have both for different situations.
- Create a place that feels safe to you, whether it is in your home or another place. It may be your favorite arm chair or a cozy corner, the coffee shop in your neighborhood, or your best friend's house. You may have safety objects in this space, comforting foods, or soothing music. When possible, use this space when journaling or dealing with triggers and flashbacks. Take some time to ensure that this space is yours and feels safe to you.
- If you are not near your safe space, visual imagining can help you recreate this space in your mind. For some, this can be difficult – you may choose to carry an object associated with your safe place with you. Or you may be able to identify some spaces where you feel safe in your everyday setting. In the coffee shop example, holding a hot cup of coffee may be grounding and comforting, so knowing that you can hold a hot cup of coffee from any coffee shop may suffice in a pinch.
- What's your safe place? Describe it below.

Nightmare Script – use this outline as a preventative tool when you fear you’ll experience a nightmare:

I am going to awake in the night & feel: _____
(insert name of the anticipated emotion)

and will be sensing in my body: _____
(describe at least three physical sensations that are anticipated)

because I will be remembering: _____
(name the trauma – by title only, no details)

At the same time, I am looking around where I am now in: _____
(the actual calendar year and date)

here: _____
(name the place where you are)

and I can see: _____
(describe some of the things that you see right now in this place)

and so I know: _____
(name the trauma again, only by title)

is not happening anymore.