

## Flashbacks

Flashbacks are memories of past traumas, triggered by something specific, that intrude into the present and make the past seem as if it is occurring at the present time. Often people have both visual and emotional recollections during the flashback. They may take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, body sensations, feelings, or the lack of anything (numbness). They may also come in little disjointed blips or as a memory of a whole event.

### **Why do flashbacks happen?**

During the initial crisis, the brain of a survivor had to protect itself from the emotional and physical impacts of the trauma. After a traumatic experience, it is not unusual for the brain to block part of the memory, banishing it from the conscious mind. In order to survive, that protected part remained isolated, unable to express the feelings and thoughts of that time. It is as though your brain put that part of you into a time capsule, which later comes out as a flashback, feeling just as intense in the present as it did during the crisis.

When that part comes out, you are experiencing the past as if it were happening today. The intense feelings and body sensations occurring are frightening because the feelings/sensations are not related to the reality of the present, and often seem to come from nowhere. You may begin to think you are crazy and become afraid of telling anyone of these experiences. You may begin to feel out of control and at the mercy of these experiences. We guarantee that these are a normal experience for someone who has experienced something traumatic.

Flashbacks don't necessary have to be a visual replaying of a trauma; many times there is no actual visual or auditory memory with flashbacks. One may have a sense of panic, of being trapped, or a feeling of powerlessness with no memory stimulating it. These experiences can also happen in dreams.

Flashbacks are unsettling and may feel overwhelming because you can become so caught up in the trauma that you forget about the safety and security of the present moment.

### **What Helps - Tips for Survivors**

1. *Tell yourself that you are having a flashback.* The power of this cannot be expressed enough. Simply by telling your brain that what you're seeing/hearing/feeling is not real right now, you will begin to bring yourself back to the present moment.
2. *Remind yourself that the worst is over.* The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past. The actual event has already occurred and you survived. Now it is the time to let out the terror, rage, hurt, and panic. Now is the time to honor your experience.

3. *Get grounded.* This means stomping your feet on the ground to remind yourself that you have feet and can get away now if you need to (there may have been times before when you could not get away - now you can). Being aware of all five senses can also help you ground yourself.
4. *Breathe.* When we get scared, we stop breathing normally. As a result, our body begins to panic from the lack of oxygen. Lack of oxygen in itself causes a great deal of panic feelings: pounding in the head, tightness in the chest and muscles, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness, and dizziness. When we breathe deeply enough, a lot of the panic feeling can decrease. Breathing deeply means putting your hand on your diaphragm, pushing against your hand, and then exhaling so the diaphragm goes in.
5. *Reorient to the present.* Begin to use your five senses in the present. Look around and see the colors in the room, the shapes of things, the people near, etc. Listen to the sounds in the room: your breathing, traffic, birds, people, cars, etc. Feel your body and what is touching it: your clothes, your own arms and hands, the chair, or the floor supporting you. Any smells or tastes you can notice help reorient you as well.
6. *Get in touch with your need for boundaries.* Sometimes when we are having a flashback we lose the sense of our physical bodies and sensations. Wrap yourself tightly in a blanket, hold a pillow or stuffed animal, climb into bed, sit in a closet - anything that can help you feel truly protected from the outside.
7. *Get support.* Depending on your situation you may need to be alone or may want someone near you. In either case it is important that your close ones know about flashbacks so they can help with the process, whether that means letting you be by yourself or being there with you.
8. *Take the time to recover.* Sometimes flashbacks are very powerful. Give yourself time to make the transition from this powerful experience. Don't expect yourself to jump into responsibilities or activities right away. Take a nap, a warm bath, or some quiet time. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Do not beat yourself up for having a flashback - they are not your fault.
9. *Honor your experience.* Appreciate yourself for having survived that horrible experience. Respect your body's need to experience a full range of feelings.
10. *Be patient.* It takes time to heal the past. It takes time to learn appropriate ways of taking care of yourself, of being an adult who has feelings, and developing effective ways of coping in the here and now.

## Flashback Protocol

This flashback halting protocol will help you remember that you are safe right now by observing your current self and grounding yourself in the present moment.

Say the following sentences out loud, filling in the blanks for yourself:

Right now I am feeling \_\_\_\_\_

*(name the current emotion)*

and I am sensing in my body \_\_\_\_\_

*(describe current body sensations, e.g. cold, hot, trembling, etc.)*

because I am remembering \_\_\_\_\_

*(name the trauma – by title only, no details)*

and, 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, e.g. bedroom, kitchen)*

and I can see \_\_\_\_\_

*(say what you see around you)*

and so I know \_\_\_\_\_

*(name the trauma again, only by title)*

is not happening to me anymore.

## Sleeping and Nightmares

Survivors may have trouble falling asleep, or if they are able to fall asleep, may be re-awakened by nightmares. This is a very common response to the trauma that survivors endure. Sleeping can be a very vulnerable time for anyone, as we are not aware of our surroundings. It can be especially difficult for survivors, who were assaulted or abused while they were sleeping. Similar strategies can be used for flashbacks that occur while one is awake for when nightmares of the abuse occur. Additionally, the following script can be filled out and placed next to our bed for when you fear you may experience a nightmare. Having it close by after having a scary experience will assist in calming the mind and grounding.

### Nightmare Script

I am going to awake in the night and 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 to me anymore.