

Flashbacks



Survivors'
Network

What are flashbacks?

Anyone who has experienced sexual abuse, rape or any other traumatic event can experience flashbacks.

Flashbacks are a memory of a frightening or painful experience, which occurred either in childhood or adult life. They tend not to be like an ordinary memory, but more a sudden and unexpected intrusion. Flashbacks can be experienced as a single slide from a slide show, a snapshot or photograph that flashes repeatedly or like a video clip. A flashback can feel almost as real as when it originally happened and can also be as frightening.

Not everyone's flashbacks are visual. Some take the form of words and phrases or sounds that were heard in the past. They can be accompanied by intense feelings of shame, sadness, anger, or physical sensations known as "body memories", which may have been felt at the time of the original abuse.

Flashbacks can happen at any time, anywhere and often occur without warning. They can be triggered by the time of year or day, TV programme, film, smells, words, phrases, a song, places, someone who reminds you in some way of your abuser, pictures, taste, a particular feeling such as fear or anxiety, having sex or being intimate with your partner. These can occur instantly or sometime later. Sometimes a flashback can occur in response to hearing voices that tell you to do things such as harm yourself or someone else. Hearing voices can be very frightening.

Remember flashbacks are a natural response to what you have experienced.

Coping with flashbacks

Some ideas are:

Remind yourself that what you are experiencing is a flashback and that this is a natural reaction to the abuse.

Look around and take note of what is happening in the here and now.

Carry a stone or something familiar and comforting in your pocket that you can stroke, hold or rub when a flashback occurs. Some people keep an elastic band around their wrist and 'ping it' to try and bring them back to the here and now.

Try to breathe from your diaphragm (put your hand just above your navel and breathe so your hand is pushed up and down.) This can help prevent a panic attack.

If the flashback occurs whilst you are out, try to get yourself to somewhere you feel safe.

If you are wakened by a flashback, also known as a 'night terror', write it down, then have something warm to drink, watch some TV, listen to music or do something else that you find relaxing. It's often best not to try and sleep until you have been able to relax for a while.

Write the flashback down or tell it to someone you trust - though it can be very painful to speak about, talking it over with someone can help.

If you self-harm / injure in response to a flashback, try to take some precautions to minimise the longer-term harm that you might do to yourself.

Notice if anything in particular triggers your flashbacks. It may be useful to avoid your triggers, although you can't always control when they occur.

If you start experiencing a flashback while having sex with your partner you can stop and take time to relax. It's OK to take time out from the sexual side of your relationship to work through these memories if you need to. Your partner should respect your choice and support you.

Do something that helps you relax, for example, have a bath, listen to your favourite music after a flashback.

Keep a list of people you can contact in the event of experiencing a flashback.