

FLASHBACKS



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 slideshow, 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, a 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 THAT FLASHBACKS ARE A NATURAL RESPONSE TO WHAT YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED

COPING WITH FLASHBACKS

Some ideas for coping with flashbacks are:

- 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.
- Keep a list of people you can contact in the event of experiencing a flashback.
- 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. We have some guidance on self-harm and injury on the '[Resources & Information](#)' tab of our website.
- 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.

SUPPORT

Survivors' Network is the Rape Crisis Centre for Sussex, supporting survivors of sexual violence and abuse across Sussex.

We believe that no one should be alone when they have experienced sexual violence. We are here for you whether your experiences were a week ago or fifty years ago.

We will support you, listen to you and believe you.

CONTACT US

Our friendly **Welcome Team** are here for all of your calls, emails and self-referrals made through our website. They will guide you through our services, and signpost you to make sure you reach the right people.

You can email them on info@survivorsnetwork.org.uk, or give us a call on **01273 203380**.

You can also visit our website, www.survivorsnetwork.org.uk, and fill out a referral form on our '[Get Help](#)' webpage so the Welcome Team can get in touch with you.

You will also find additional resources and self-help guides on the '[Resources & Information](#)' tab.

HELPLINE & EMAIL SUPPORT

Our Helpline & Email Service is open every Monday (7-9pm) & Wednesday (12-2pm) for people of any gender aged 14+. We offer support to survivors, professionals and loved ones/supporters of survivors.

Call us on **01273 720110** or email at help@survivorsnetwork.org.uk.