

## What are they?

Flashbacks are memories of past traumas or feelings of 're-living' the event. They may be in a picture you see in your mind or they may appear in the form of sounds, smells, body sensations, and feelings. Often, there is no actual memory that you can see or hear. You may have a sense of anxiety, panic, feeling trapped or powerless. Your body is responding to what it thinks is a threat. (It does not always have the ability to tell the difference between a real danger 'in this moment' and a danger feeling from a memory – so it prepares to run or to defend itself.) These experiences may also happen during dreams.

When a flashback happens, it feels as though the traumatic event that happened in the past is happening in the present moment. The feelings and body sensations can be very strong and frightening. It can be difficult to remember to reassure yourself that the feelings are not from what is happening right now and to stay grounded.

Often people begin to think that they are crazy and are afraid to tell anyone of these experiences. It can feel as though you are not in control and at the mercy of the feelings and sensations.

You may begin to avoid people, places or situations that you think caused the flashback. Sometimes flashbacks occur when you hear a certain sound or song on the radio. It may happen if you hear a voice or see a person with similar physical characteristics to the person that hurt you. It may happen during sexual activity or if you are in a similar situation where you experience trapped feelings such as with an argument or being with aggressive people. Flashbacks can be caused by certain odours or even colours that may have been present during your assault. Sometimes flashbacks can become more frequent around important dates such as the anniversary of the assault or court dates.

### Flashbacks are normal.

The textbook definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is: The normal reaction of people experiencing an event that is outside the range of normal human experience. Vietnam veterans are perhaps the most well known for the experiences of PTSD and the symptoms of flashbacks. So, PTSD is the normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

## What helps?

### 1. Tell Yourself That You Are Having A Flashback.

Flashbacks can be part of a 'normal response to an abnormal event'

### 2. Remind Yourself That The Worst Is Over.

The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past. The actual event took place in the past and YOU SURVIVED.

Now it is a safe time to let out that terror, rage, hurt and/or panic.

**3. Get Grounded.** This may mean even stamping your feet on the ground as a reminder to yourself that you have feet and can get away if you need to. (During your assault you couldn't get away.)

**4. Breathe.** When we get scared we stop breathing normally. As a result our body may panic from the lack of oxygen. Lack of oxygen can cause pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness and dizziness. If we breathe slowly and deeply enough, a lot of the panic feelings can decrease. If you place your hand on your upper stomach area, you should feel your hand moving when you inhale and exhale.

**5. Become Aware Of The Present.** Begin to use your five senses. Look around and see the colours in the room, the shapes of things nearby, people around you etc. Listen to the sounds you can hear, your breathing, traffic, wind, people talking, dogs barking etc. Be aware of your body and what it is in contact with – your clothes, your hands/arms, the chair or floor supporting you.

**6. Reassure Yourself.** Remind yourself that you are not in danger now. Remember that you can get out/away if you need to and that it is okay to feel the feelings of the past without judging yourself. You need to know that it is safe to experience the sensations of the past and to let go of them.

**7. Get In Touch With Your Need For Feeling Safe.** Sometimes during a flashback you lose sense of where you leave off and the world begins. Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or stuffed animal, go to bed or find another way that you can feel yourself protected from the outside.

**8. 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 the people close to you know about flashbacks so they can help with the process, whether that means letting you be by yourself or by being there, talking or staying quiet.

**9. Take Time.** Sometimes flashbacks are very powerful. Give yourself time to recover from this powerful experience. Don't expect yourself to jump back into your activities right away. Take a nap, a warm bath or have some quiet time. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Learn relaxation techniques and use them regularly.

**10. Honour Your Experience.** Appreciate yourself for having survived that horrible time. Respect your body's need to experience those feelings of the past. Resisting the feelings and sensations can make the experience more difficult.

**11. Be Patient.** It takes time to heal the past. It takes time to learn good ways of taking care of yourself. Get enough rest. Eat healthy. Be physically active such as running or walking. Don't use alcohol and drugs. Limit caffeine intake.

**12. Find A Good Counsellor.** Give yourself permission to reach out for professional help. Look for a therapist who understands the process of healing from trauma. A counsellor is a guide, a support, a coach in your healing process. You do not have to do it alone.....ever again.

**13. Join A Self Help Group.** Talking to others about your feelings helps relieve stress. Other survivors are wonderful friends in the journey of healing. Sharing your story helps in their healing too. Finding out that others feel what you are feeling as well helps you realize you are not alone.

**14. Know You Are Not Crazy.** You Are Healing!

**For more information call SADVTC: 807-684-6751**

Adapted from "Flashbacks" by Laurie Ann Chutis, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

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