



# Flashbacks and Nightmares

A flashback is a memory that returns to our consciousness. It might be a smell, a taste, a sound, an image, an emotion, or a combination of these things. It might last a moment or linger on for weeks.

Flashbacks can be described in many different ways. Some people describe flashbacks as being like nightmares that happen to you while you are awake, remembering memories, or re-experiencing the assault. As well, people may describe smelling alcohol or perfume when there is no one present, hearing a word over and over again in their heads, feeling panic or dread, or seeing pictures, like snapshots or a movie in their head. Whatever terms you use to describe them, they are usually very frightening experiences.

You may feel powerless, because you are unable to control when and where these memories may emerge. It could feel odd, but acknowledge these. Allow yourself to feel them. This may feel painful and frightening at first, however, flashbacks will lose their intensity over time. Remember, they are memories.

## Some strategies to try when experiencing a flashback

- Relaxing may help reduce the stress that comes with a flashback. Initially this will be difficult, but the skill of 'relaxing' (which is not easy) will get easier by using the strategies on this list.
- Remind yourself that the abuse is not happening now. Consciously take a check of your surroundings, of whom you are with etc, in the 'now'.
- If you are feeling pulled into the past, touch or grip something that feels safe- like a table, chair, a toy or a pet. This will help to 'ground' and stabilise us in the present moment.
- Locate (perhaps pre identify this at an earlier time) a safe place, then breathe deeply and slowly. If you re unable to get to a place that you consider safe, then imagine one (it would be helpful to have this pre imagined). Or, you could perhaps look at a photograph, a memento, an artwork or an inspirational quote of meaning to yourself. Consider carrying something with you at all times to use as your cue/ reminder for calm.
- Find or call a support person. If you are unable to contact them, remember their support and encouragement. Think of what they would say to you now to assist you to feel 'stronger' in managing this.
- Use the flashback protocol shown below. With practice working through these questions may help to lessen the intensity and frequency of your flashbacks.



### **Flashback protocol\***

These questions will help you acknowledge your feelings and ground you in the present

**Right now, I'm feeling** (describe your emotions, for example fear)

**I'm sensing in my body** (describe your bodily sensations, for example nausea or butterflies in my stomach)

**Because I'm remembering** (name the trauma only- do not go into details)

**I am looking around where I am now, in** (the place you are now and the month and year)

**I can see** (describe some things you can see now)

**So, I know** (name the trauma again)

**Is not happening anymore**

When we are stressed, we sometimes forget to breathe. It is helpful to shift our attention away from the flashback or nightmare and concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly. Diverting your thoughts from the flashback to breathing and counting will calm you and help to ease the flashback from your mind.

### **Tips on how to breathe deeply and slowly**

Repeat the following sequence three times:

- 1- Close your mouth. Take a big, deep breath in and slowly count to three. Imagine your breath going all the way down into your stomach.
- 2- Pause for a count of one while holding that breath in
- 3- Open your mouth and slowly let all your breath out while counting to three

Its up to you whether you keep your eyes open or not. If you do not keep them open, try to focus on something that's not moving.

\*adapted from Rothschild, B (2000). The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment. New York: W.W. Norton



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