

# Flashbacks

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## What are they?

Flashbacks are memories of past traumas. They may take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, body sensations, feelings or the lack of them (numbness). Many times there is no actual visual or auditory memory. One may have the sense of panic, being trapped, feeling powerless with no memory stimulating it. These experiences can also happen in dreams.

As a child (or adolescent), we had to insulate ourselves from the emotional and physical horrors of the trauma. In order to survive, that insulated child remained isolated, unable to express the feelings and thoughts of that time. It is as though we put that part into a time capsule until it comes out full-blown in the present.

When that part comes out, the little one is experiencing the past as if it were happening today. As the flashback occurs, it is as if we forget that we have an *adult* part available to us for reassurance, protection and grounding. The intense feelings and body sensations occurring are so frightening because the feelings/sensations are not related to the reality of the present and many times seem to come from nowhere.

We begin to think we are crazy and afraid of telling anyone (including our therapist) of these experiences. We feel out of control and at the mercy of our experiences.

We begin to avoid situations, and stimuli, that we think triggered it. Many times flashbacks occur during any form of sexual intimacy, or it may be a person who has similar characteristics to the perpetrator, or it may be a situation today that stirs up similar trapped feelings (confronting aggressive people).

If you are feeling small...you are experiencing a flashback.

If you are experiencing stronger feelings than are called for in the present situation...you are experiencing a flashback.

## Flashbacks are normal

Vietnam vets have normalized this experience and have coined the term *post traumatic* stress syndrome.

Even the diagnostic category book for psychiatry defines post traumatic stress syndrome as the normal experience of all people experiencing an event that is outside the range of normal human experience.

Flashbacks feel crazy because the little one doesn't know that there is an adult survivor available to help.

## What helps

1. Tell yourself that you are having a flashback.
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 long ago when you were [younger] and you survived. Now it is time to let out that terror, rage, hurt and/or panic. Now is the time to *honor your* experience.

3. Get grounded. This means stamping your feet on the ground so that the little one knows you have feet and can get away if you need to. ([If the trauma occurred as a child]. . . you couldn't get away: Now you can. }
4. Breathe. When we get scared we stop normal breathing. 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, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness, dizziness. When we breathe deeply enough, a lot of the panic feeling can decrease. Breathing deeply means putting your hand on your diaphragm and breathing deeply enough so that your diaphragm pushes against your hand and then exhaling so that 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 [around you]: 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 floor supporting you.
6. Speak to the little one and reassure him/her. It is very healing to get your adult in the now, that you can get out if you need to, that it is OK to feel the feelings of long ago without reprisal. The child needs to know that it is safe to experience the feelings/sensations and let go of the past.
7. Get in touch with your needs for boundaries. Sometimes when we are having a flashback we lose the sense of where we leave off and the world begins; as if we do not have skin. Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or stuffed animal, go to bed, sit in a closet... any way that you can feel yourself truly 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 your close ones know about flashbacks so they can help with the process, whether that means letting you be by yourself or being there.
9. Take time to recover. Sometimes flashbacks are very powerful. Give yourself the time to make the transition from this powerful experience. Don't expect yourself to jump into adult activities right away. Take a nap, or a warm bath, or some quiet time. Do not beat yourself up for having a flashback. Appreciate how much your little one went through. . . .
10. Honor your experience. Appreciate yourself for having survived that horrible time [when you were younger]. Respect your body's need to experience those feelings of long ago.
11. Be patient. It takes time to heal the past. It takes time to learn appropriate ways of taking care of self., of being an adult who has feelings, and developing effective ways of coping in the here and now.
12. Find a competent therapist. Look for a therapist who understands the processes of healing from [trauma: incest, rape, war.] A therapist can be a guide, a support, a coach in this healing process. You do not have to do it alone . . . ever again.
13. Join a self-help group. Survivors are wonderful allies in this process of healing. It is a healing thing to share your process with others who understand so deeply what you are going through.
14. Know you are not crazy . . . you are healing!