

Flashbacks



What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are an involuntary recall of past traumatic events. They may be experienced as pictures, sounds, smells, feelings, or the lack of them (emotional numbness). You may feel panicky, or trapped. You may feel powerless without knowing why. These experiences can also happen in dreams. Sometimes they are experienced together with a self-critical voice or hearing an abuser's voice again.

You may think you are going mad and are afraid of telling anyone what is happening. But learning some simple grounding techniques and talking about it with someone you trust will help to manage the intense emotions that accompany flashbacks.

What are flashbacks?

As a child you had to protect yourself from the emotional and physical horrors of abuse. In order to survive, the child had to submit to the abuse, unable to express feelings and thoughts of that time. Children cannot make any sense of cruelty inflicted on them. But adults can slowly process these painful memories. Flashbacks and nightmares are a sign of the subconscious mind starting to process the memories. As such, they are a sign of recovery.

When memories come back, the child within you is experiencing the past as if it were happening today. As the flashback happens you may forget you have an adult self who is available for comfort, protection and grounding. These extreme feelings and bodily sensations are so frightening because they are not related to the present and often seem to appear out of the blue.

Properties of trauma memories

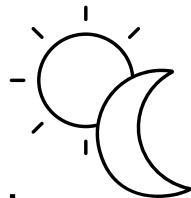
Memories of traumatic experiences often have special properties that make them different from ordinary memories.

Nowness



When you have an unwanted memory of your trauma, it can feel as though the events are happening right now in the present moment. Some trauma memories are so strong that you might temporarily lose touch with where you are. Psychologists call this 'nowness'.

During day and night



Trauma memories can be experienced as unwanted 'flashbacks' during the day, or as nightmares while you sleep.

Properties of trauma memories

Involuntary

Trauma memories often come to your mind against your will, even when you try not to think about what happened. You might find that they are triggered automatically by things around you which remind you of the trauma.

Sensory

Trauma memories are powerful and can be experienced in any of your senses. You might see, hear, smell, or taste the events happening again. You might experience feelings in your body that you felt at the time. You may even re-experience pain that you felt during the trauma.

Properties of trauma memories

Fragmented



Ordinary memories usually have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In contrast, trauma memories are sometimes fragmented. Instead of remembering the whole story, it is common to have unwanted memories of the worst parts.

Vivid and unchanging



Ordinary memories tend to fade with time – you might remember an overview of what happened, but you forget the details. Many people who have experienced trauma find that their memories don't fade or change, even after many years.

Properties of trauma memories

Emotional



When your trauma memories are triggered, you might feel the same strong emotions that you felt at the time of the trauma, such as fear, terror, shame, or disgust. Re-experiencing your trauma memories can also trigger strong new emotional responses.

What can I do to help myself

Remind yourself that the worst is over

Tell yourself out loud that you are having a flashback. The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past. You are now processing those painful memories, which is difficult and frightening work.

Breathe

When we get frightened we stop normal breathing. As a result, our body begins to panic because we don't get enough oxygen. Lack of oxygen causes even more panic. You may experience pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness and dizziness. When we breathe deeply and slowly the feelings of panic can decrease.

See our audio resources: Mindfulness of breath, breathing to activate your soothing system

What can I do to help myself

Talk to the child within you and say it is OK

It is very important that the child within you knows that your adult self is around and available. The child needs to know that it is safe to experience the feelings and let go of the past.

Find your boundaries.

When in flashback you may lose the sense of where you end and the world begins. Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or soft toy, go to bed or sit in a safe place as a way of finding your boundaries.

Get help What can I do to help myself

You may need to be alone or you may want someone near you. In either case it is important that your close friends know about your flashbacks so they can help with the process, whether that means letting you be by yourself or being there with you, whatever is right for you.

Take time to regain control

Sometimes flashbacks are very powerful. Don't expect yourself to be able to do adult things immediately. Be kind and look after you. Do something that you enjoy.

Be patient

It takes time to heal the past. It takes time to learn ways of taking care of yourself, of being an adult who has feelings and developing effective ways of coping in the here and now.

What can I do to help myself

Carry an object that reminds you of the present

Some people find it helpful to touch or look at a particular object during a flashback. This might be something you decide to carry in your pocket or bag, or something that you have with you anyway, such as a keyring or a piece of jewellery.

Comfort yourself

You could curl up in a blanket, cuddle a pet, listen to soothing music or watch a favourite film.

Keep a diary

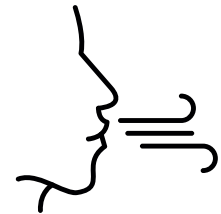
Making a note of what happens when you have a flashback could help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you. You might also learn to notice early signs that they are beginning to happen.

Grounding techniques

Connecting to your breath, your five senses and your body is the best way to calm yourself at times when flashbacks or anxiety feel overwhelming.

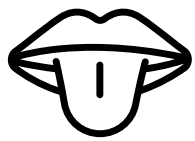
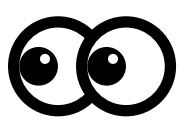
These steps provide easy-to-follow guidance.

Breathe



- Sit on a chair, place both feet flat on the floor, and breathe slowly and steadily into your belly so it expands.
- Breathe in for a count of two – breathe out for a count of four.
- Keep your focus on the breath – on the way in and on the way out.

Breathe this way for at least five minutes or until your breath becomes more calm and regular.



Grounding techniques



Check your five senses

Say out loud what you are experiencing as you check in with each of your senses:

- **Smell** – what can you smell? A soothing smell is the fastest way to signal calm and safety to your nervous system.
- **Touch** – what can you touch around you? Hold a warm cup of tea in your hands or a cold bottle against your face. Notice the sensations.
- **Sight** – what can you see around you? Say out loud what you can see and describe it in detail.
- **Taste** – can you taste anything? Say out loud what the last thing you ate tasted like and describe it in detail.
- **Sound** – what can you hear? Describe in detail what you can hear – is it traffic? Birds? Your own breathing?

Grounding techniques

Move your body

- Stamp your feet. Notice the sensation and sound as they hit the floor. Remind yourself you can run now.
- Move around. Take your time and notice the movement of each step and notice how your legs, arms, feet and hands feel while you move.
- Hold your shoulders right up to the ears and let them drop. Repeat as many times as it takes to release tension. Clap and rub your hands together. Hear the noise and feel the sensations in your hands and arms.

See our audio resources - Sensory grounding using your five senses.

What is a flashback protocol?

A flashback protocol is a structured method designed to help when experiencing a flashback to regain a sense of safety and presence in the present moment.

1. **Awareness of present sensations:** Acknowledge and describe current bodily sensations.
2. **Reconnection to the present:** Identifying the date, location and surroundings.
3. **Grounding in the present:** Naming the date, location and surrounding re-engages with your current reality.
4. **Reconciliation of self:** Brings together the 'experiencing self' and the 'observing self.'

On the next page is a script to support in quickly halting flashbacks.

Flashback protocol

Say the following sentences filling in the blanks, following the instructions:

- **Right now I am feeling** _____ , (name the current emotion, usually fear)
- **and I am sensing in my body** _____ , (describe current bodily sensations in detail),
- **because I am remembering** _____ . (name the trauma by title, only — no details).
- **And, at the same time , I am looking around where I am now in** _____ (say the year),

Continued on the next page.

Flashback protocol

here _____ , (name the place where you are)

- **and I can see** _____ , (describe some of the things that you see right now , in this place),
- **and so I know** _____ , (name the trauma again)
- **is not happening now/anymore."**

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

Useful resources

8 Keys to Safe Trauma Recovery: Take-Charge Strategies to Empower Your Healing (8 Keys to Mental Health)

Babette Rothschild. W.W. Norton (2010)

The Body Keeps the Score; Brain, Mind, and Body In the Healing of Trauma.

Bessel van der Kolk (2014) Viking

This is a broad and well-informed book about how we understand trauma and treat it. Aimed at the general reader, but useful for all.

Audio resources in our self help section:

Sensory grounding using your five senses.

