

Flashbacks

Flashbacks are memories of past traumatic experiences. They may take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, bodily sensations, feelings, or the lack of feeling (numbness). While most people think of flashbacks as being visual memories, often they solely consist of a sense of panic, of being trapped, or a feeling of powerlessness with no memory attached to these feelings.

Because experiencing sexual assault is physically and emotionally overwhelming, it is common for a person to detach from the experience as it occurs. Although it has been temporarily pushed aside, the intensity of their experience will often resurface in the form of flashbacks feeling just as intense in the present as it did during the crisis; as if it were happening today. The intense feelings and bodily sensations are not related to the reality of the present and often seem to come from nowhere. For this reason, the person may begin to think she/he is going crazy because out of no where she/he feels out of control, panicked, and scared.

Triggers

A trigger is anything that sets off a flashback. Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. A person's triggers can be activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. The senses identified as being the most common to trigger someone are sight and sound, followed by touch and smell, and taste close behind. It is very common to be triggered by seeing someone that reminds them of the perpetrator or by hearing a phrase that was said to them during the sexual assault. Yet, triggers are not limited to those specific cues that were available during the assault, they can also be things such as the time of year that the assault took place. For example, if the assault took place when the person first came to University, the change of season to fall could act as a trigger. Also, it is common for survivors to feel triggered when there are going through times of stress. While this stress may not be related to the assault in any way, just an overall increase in their feelings of stress could trigger them to flashbacks about the sexual assault.

Flashbacks are Normal

Triggers and flashbacks are common to survivors of any kind of trauma. They are particularly common among people who have post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is the normal (and common) reaction to events that are beyond our normal realm of experience (such as sexual assault, war, or natural disaster), and it consists of suffering from nightmares, flashbacks, gaps in memory, and a sense of a lack of connection to others. It is very common for survivors of sexual assault to suffer from PTSD at some point after the sexual assault.

Coping with Flashbacks

1. **Tell yourself that you are having a flashback**, and that you are safe now.
2. **Remind yourself that the worst is over.** The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past. The actual event has already occurred and you **survived**. Now it is the time to let out the terror, rage, hurt, and/or panic. Now is the time to **honour your experience**.
3. **Breathe.** When we get scared we stop breathing normally. As a result, our body begins to panic from the lack of oxygen, which in itself causes a great deal of panic feelings; pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness, and dizziness. When we breathe deeply enough, the panic feeling can decrease. Breathing deeply means breathing in so that your diaphragm expands. If you were to put your hand on your stomach, your stomach would push against your hand when you inhale.
4. **Get grounded.** This means stamping your feet on the ground to remind yourself that you have feet and can get away now if you need to. (There may have been times before when you could not get away, now you can.) Being aware of all five senses can also help you ground yourself.
5. **Reorient to the present.** Begin to use your five senses in the present. Look around and see the colours in the room, the shapes of things, the people near, etc. Listen to the sounds in the room: 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 the floor supporting you.
6. **Get in touch with your need 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.
7. **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 with you.
8. **Take the time to recover.** Flashbacks can be very powerful. Give yourself time to make the transition from this powerful experience. Don't expect yourself to jump into other activities right away. Take a nap, a warm bath, or some quiet time. Be kind and gentle with yourself. Do not beat yourself up for having a flashback.
9. **Honour your experience.** Appreciate yourself for having survived that horrible time. Respect your body's need to experience a full range of feelings.
10. **Be patient.** It takes time to heal. It takes time to learn appropriate ways of taking care of yourself and developing effective ways of coping in the here and now.