



## **FLASHBACKS AND NIGHTMARES**

### **How can I help myself during and after flashbacks?**

If you have experienced one or more flashbacks, you may be feeling frightened, confused, disorientated, and/or overwhelmed. These feelings are understandable and they are normal reactions to what can be a terrifying experience.

You are not going mad or crazy; you are remembering experiences, feelings, thoughts and images which were too frightening or impossible to deal with at the time that they occurred.

There are no specific reactions to a flashback. Every reaction to a flashback is an individual response, usually based on the ways in which you coped with the rape or assault. For example:

- You may experience a flashback and feel very numb; you may have shut your feelings down and may watch the rape or assault scene as though it were happening to someone else.
- You may feel nauseous, as if you are going to be physically sick, or you may actually vomit.
- You may feel absolute terror, as if you are going to die.
- You may experience panic attacks and feel totally out of control.

Although they can feel very frightening, flashbacks are actually a good sign that you are unearthing the buried trauma and that you are on your way to recovery.

It is important that you reassure yourself with the knowledge that this is a temporary state, it will not last forever and through time, the flashbacks will reduce in frequency and intensity. You may find yourself trying to avoid all potential triggers for these memories. This is not possible as there are so many situations that could trigger memories. While it is not possible to control the nature and strength of the flashbacks, you can do a lot of things to help lessen the power and impact that they have on your life.

### **Take yourself to a safe place**

This may be in your home, curled up on the settee with a warm quilt around you, or in the bath, or in your favourite chair, or at a good friend's house. Go wherever you need to go in order to feel safe and where you know you will be safe. If you are not

able to go to a safe place at the time of the flashback, remind yourself that what you have experienced is a memory, take several deep breaths and promise yourself that as soon as you can, you will take time out to explore the flashback in more detail.

### **Don't fight the flashback**

Although this may feel difficult, try to breathe deeply and let the memory surface. Using alcohol, solvents, drugs, food and/or self-injury etc. to bury the feelings from a flashback can actually add to and prolong the trauma of recovering buried memories. It can be hard to change these familiar coping mechanisms and old habits die hard; however, it will be very helpful to you in the long run if you can manage to avoid coping with flashbacks in this way. If you try to ignore or push away emerging memories they are likely to feel stronger and more powerful as they fight for recognition. Remember you have survived the abuse - this is just a memory

### **Ground yourself**

Remind yourself of the day, date, time etc. Look at your surroundings, where you are right now. Remind yourself of how old you are, where you live etc. Try to let part of yourself stay in the present while, at the same time allowing yourself to remember your past.

### **Remind yourself that this is a memory**

This is a memory of something that has already happened to you and you have survived it. Reassure yourself that you are not being hurt in the present, even though you may feel as though it is happening now. It is important that you keep on reminding yourself that you have come through this experience and that you are now on the road to recovery.

### **Give yourself space and time to recover**

Reliving memories can be a painful and exhausting experience. It may take several hours or days for you to feel okay again. If you need to rest, sleep, cry or be angry, give yourself permission to do so. Don't jump up and try to do something else straight away.

### **Write about your memory**

If you feel able to write down what you remember from the flashback. This can help to 'get it out' of your mind by putting it on paper. This can also be used as a diary or journal of your recovery. Useful things to write about:

- What you remembered
- Sounds and Pictures
- Sensations
- Smells
- How you felt at the time and how you feel now

### **Comfort yourself**

After having one or more flashbacks, you may feel vulnerable and low. This is the time to give yourself a reward or treat for all of your hard work. It will be helpful if you can do something that makes you feel good, e.g. a warm aromatherapy /bubble bath, a drink of hot chocolate or milk, a bunch of flowers, a long relaxing walk, meeting with supportive friends, seeing a movie, listening to your favourite music, cooking your favourite food etc.

### **Talk about the flashback**

Even though you may feel like keeping the flashback to yourself, it can be really helpful if you share it with a supportive person. In talking it through you may gain more insight to yourself and it may help you to put your experience into perspective. Remember, you have not done anything wrong, being raped or assaulted was not your fault and you do not have to suffer in silence. Give yourself permission to receive support and understanding from others.

### **Be proud of yourself**

You have come through a frightening experience and you're still in one piece. You have let yourself remember a very traumatic time in your life and that takes a lot of courage and strength to do. Through this process of remembering and acknowledging your past, you have moved deeper into your journey of healing and have grown a little bit more.

### **Breathe**

When we get frightened we stop normal breathing. As a result our body begins to panic because we haven't got enough oxygen. Lack of oxygen 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.

## **After a Flashback / Nightmare**

### **Re-establish 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 nearby, 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 floor.

### **To ground yourself**

Use the five senses (sound, touch, smell, taste, and sight). To connect with the here and now, you want to do something that will bring all your attention to the present moment. Some grounding techniques are described below.

- **Sound: Turn on loud music**

Loud, jarring music will be hard to ignore. As a result, your attention will be directed to that noise, bringing you into the present moment.

- **Touch: Grip a piece of ice**

If you notice that you are slipping into a flashback or a dissociative state, hold onto a piece of ice. It will be difficult to direct your attention away from the extreme coldness of the ice, forcing you to stay in touch with the present moment.

- **Smell: Sniff some strong peppermint**

When you smell something strong, it is very hard to focus on anything else. In this way, smelling peppermint can bring you into the present moment,

- **Taste: Bite into a lemon**

The sourness of a lemon and the strong sensation it produces in your mouth when you bite into it can force you to stay in the present moment.

- **Sight: Take an inventory of everything around you**

Connect with the present moment by listing everything around you. Identify all the colours you see. Count all the pieces of furniture around you. List off all the noises you hear. Taking an inventory of your immediate environment can directly connect you with the present moment.

## **PANIC ATTACKS**

### **Breathing**

- First down and concentrate on your breathing.
- Breathe through pursed lips, as if you are whistling, or pinch one nostril and breathe through your nose.
- It is harder to hyperventilate when you breathe through your nose or pursed lips because you cannot move as much air.
- Slow your breathing to 1 breath every 5 seconds, or slow enough that symptoms gradually go away.
- Try belly-breathing, which fills your lungs fully, slows your breathing rate, and helps you relax. Place one hand on your belly just below the ribs. Place the other hand on your chest. You can do this while standing, but it may be more comfortable while you are lying on the floor with your knees bent. Take a deep breath through your nose. As you inhale, let your belly push your hand out. Keep your chest still. As you exhale through pursed lips, feel your hand go down. Use the hand on your belly to help you push all the air out. Take your time exhaling.
- Repeat these steps 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.