



Information Leaflet on Flashbacks

Flashbacks - what are they?

Many women survivors of sexual violence experience flashbacks at one time or another. Flashbacks are temporary states of remembering something painful or traumatic which has been hidden for quite some time in the subconscious mind and during a flashback you may feel as though aspects of the rape or sexual assault are actually happening to you now. The duration of a flashback differs and could last from a few seconds to a few hours.

When do flashbacks occur?

Flashbacks can occur at unpredictable and unexpected times. They can be triggered by anything that serves as a reminder of the rape or assault or the perpetrator, for example they can occur if you are feeling any of the following:

- Low or vulnerable
- Helpless or powerless
- Exhausted or tired
- Sad or tearful
- Angry or resentful
- Embarrassed or ashamed
- Anxious or worried
- Trapped or hounded
- Sexual or intimate
- Happy or excited
- Calm or relaxed

As this list shows, flashbacks can occur regardless of how you are feeling. The list is not intended to be exhaustive as there are so many ways you could be feeling when a flashback occurs.

Many women have cited the following example as a trigger for flashbacks - someone whose physical appearance reminds you of the perpetrator including:

- Mannerisms
- Facial features
- Behaviour
- Voice
- Clothes
- Smell
- Touch

Flashbacks can be triggered at any time and can happen anywhere for example you could be watching a programme on television or reading a magazine or out at the theatre or at a restaurant when a flashback occurs.

Do flashbacks differ in any way?

Yes, flashbacks can be experienced in many forms and combinations which include some or all of the following:

Visual flashbacks

This is like watching a film or slideshow of the original rape or assault. You may experience this as happening inside your head or you may experience this as happening outside of you and involving other people. This might be likely to happen if people around you remind you of the rape/assault or the perpetrator by doing or saying similar things. You may find yourself watching and/or re-experiencing all of the rape/assault scene or tiny fragments of it.

The images you see could be clear or distorted and you may see the same picture from different angles at different times. For example, you may see a picture of the perpetrator coming towards you, or grabbing you and you may then re-experience the feelings you had when you were raped or assaulted; or you may see the perpetrator and yourself in the same picture, so you are watching the picture from an observers perspective and you may feel cut off from any feeling.

Auditory flashbacks

This is described as hearing conversations or sounds which are associated with the rape/assault. You might experience these sounds as being inside your head or outside of you ie in the same room. These sounds could be clear or distorted and may sound near or far away.

Sensory flashbacks

This is described as feeling bodily sensations associated with the rape/assault. This type of flashback could manifest in the following ways:

- You may feel as if you are being touched on any part of your body when in reality, there is no one there. This could range from feeling someone touch your arm to feeling as though someone is lying on top of you.

- Depending on the severity of this experience, you may feel anxious, frightened, confused or that you are going mad, particularly if you do not understand what is happening to you, or if you try to consciously stop it happening and are unable to.
- During this type of flashback you may re-experience the physical sensations and/or pain that you felt when being raped or assaulted.
- These sensations could be experienced as happening anywhere on or inside of your body.
- This type of flashback can also include strong, overwhelming sensations of taste and/or smell.

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 flashback 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.

Do not 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 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.

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. Do not 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 may be:

- What you remembered
- Sounds
- Pictures
- Sensations
- Smells
- How you felt at the time
- 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, for example, a warm 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 sexually 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 are 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. Well done!

Contact details for Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland:

Tel: 0800 035 2794 (Evening helpline: Tues, Wed & Thurs, 6 pm-8.30 pm)

Tel: 0191 222 0272 (Admin)

Email: emailsupport@rctn.org.uk

General enquiries: enquiries@rctn.org.uk