

Flashbacks



Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland offers counselling, support and information to women and girls aged 13 and over. All of our services are free and confidential.

You can use our services if you live, work or study in Tyneside (Gateshead, Newcastle, North and South Tyneside) or Northumberland.

Our services are for women and girls who have been raped, or who have experienced any kind of sexual violence at any time in their lives. The sexual violence may have been carried out by a stranger or by someone you know – including a member of the family.

The aim of the booklet is to help you understand flashbacks.

What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks can be a natural result of experiencing traumatic event/s like sexual abuse. They are our brain's way of coping with what has happened. The kind of traumatic event you have experienced can affect how strong the flashbacks may be.

Flashbacks can happen as images, thoughts or feelings. They can be intense or vague physical symptoms that you might have no explanation for. They can last for seconds or hours.

Flashbacks can be powerful and feel like you are experiencing the past in the present. They can be scary and confusing.

In order to physically and psychologically survive abuse you may have buried confusing and painful experiences deep within your subconscious mind. The memories are buried and stored in the subconscious mind until they are triggered or you are able to deal with them.

When flashbacks are triggered a chain of associations happens in your brain. This can make it feel like the abuse is happening in the here and now, this is called re-experiencing. Re-experience can cause you to withdraw or disassociate.

Flashbacks can emerge as nightmares, you may have dreams that explicitly recall the abuse you experienced or your dreams may be symbolic.

When flashbacks are initially triggered, you may not have any memory of the abuse, or you may just have fragments of memories, which do not make sense. You might also remember all of the abuse but not how you felt at the time.

If we understand flashbacks, and their purpose, we can become less afraid of them.

Flashbacks can be a natural part of healing and we can use them to process what has happened.

If you are accessing counselling it may be that flashbacks increase. This can be normal and it's important that you discuss this with your counsellor if you are concerned. Part of the normal process of counselling is for thoughts and feelings to surface more as you begin to talk and work through what has happened to you.

When do flashbacks happen?

Flashbacks can be brought on by a trigger. You might know what triggers your flashbacks or it may feel like they happen without explanation.

Sometimes they are triggered by anything that serves as a reminder of what happened to you. Triggers are often linked to your senses; sight, smell, sound, taste and touch.

Flashback can also be triggered when you experience specific or strong emotions, including positive emotions.

Common triggers are:

- Seeing the perpetrator or someone who looks like them.
- Hearing the perpetrator's voice or a voice like theirs.
- Specific mannerisms, facial features, behaviour or clothes.
- Specific smells like aftershave, flowers, alcohol.
- Songs or pieces of music.
- Intimate contact.
- Unexpected physical touch.
- Feeling trapped, angry, excited, scared, vulnerable, sad.

The list above is not exhaustive. Flashbacks and what triggers them are unique to the individual, the trauma she has experienced and how her mind has coped with the abuse.

Are all flashbacks the same?

Flashbacks can be experienced in many ways, they can be visual, auditory or sensory:

Sight: Visual Flashbacks

This is like watching a film or slideshow of what happened. You may experience this as happening inside your head or you may experience it as happening outside of you.

You may find yourself watching and/or re-experiencing all of what happened to you, parts of what happened or even tiny fragments of what you remember.

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. You may then re-experience the feeling you had when you were assaulted, or you may see yourself and the perpetrator in the same picture or as if you are an observer watching what happened. You may feel cut off from any feeling.

Sound: Auditory Flashbacks

This is described as hearing conversations or sounds, which are associated with trauma. You may experience sounds as being inside your head or outside, i.e. in the same room.

The sounds could be clear or distorted and may sound near or far away.

Taste, Touch, Smell: Sensory Flashbacks

This is where you feel bodily sensation associated with what happened to you.

Feeling as if you are being touched on any part of your body, when in reality there is no one there. These sensations could be experienced as happening anywhere on or inside your body.

During this type of flashback you may re-experience the physical sensations and/or the pain you felt when you were being abused.

They can also include strong, overwhelming sensations of taste and/or smell.

How will I react to a flashback?

How you react to a flashback is individual to you and your reaction to the trauma you experienced.

Some common reactions are:

- Feeling nauseous, as if you are going to be physically sick and you may even vomit.
- Feeling very scared or terrified.
- Feeling numb. You may have shut your feelings down (dissociated) or watch the flashback as though it is happening to someone else.
- You may experience panic attacks and feel out of control.

Can flashbacks be controlled?

Flashbacks can happen anywhere, at any time and without knowing what the trigger might be. This can mean it is difficult to make sense of what's happening and to feel like you have any control.

Flashbacks can be frightening and confusing, especially when they are first triggered or they feel out of control. You may be unable to make sense of feelings, images and sensations.

You might try to bury the surfacing memories through fear of being overwhelmed or out of control. Flashbacks can bring back feelings associated with the abuse you experienced such as feeling helpless, powerless and alone.

Although these reactions and many more are natural responses to flashbacks, they can have a negative impact. You may recognise the triggers and attempt to avoid them in the hope that if the trigger is avoided you will have no more flashbacks. Unfortunately this is not usually possible. Flashbacks cannot usually be prevented through the avoidance of specific triggers.

Overtime it is likely that flashbacks will reduce in frequency and intensity. While it is not possible to control the nature of the flashback or the strength of it, you can do things to help lessen the power and impact that they have on your life.

Helping yourself during a flashback

During a flashback 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.

Flashbacks are a sign that the buried trauma is being unearthed and can mean that you are working towards recovery.

It is important that you reassure yourself with the knowledge that flashbacks are a temporary state. The flashbacks you are experiencing will not last forever. They can be a good sign that your mind is working through what it needs to.

Take yourself to a safe place

Following a flashback you may feel vulnerable and low. This is the time to take care of yourself. This may be in your home, curled up on the settee with a warm blanket, or in the bath, or in your favourite chair, or at a good friend's house. Go wherever you need to in order to feel safe and where you know you will be safe.

You could buy yourself flowers, go for a long walk, meet a friend, watch a film or listen to music. You could also cook your favourite food. These are just a few suggestions. The list could be endless, do what you feel is best for you.

If this is not possible to make yourself feel safe at the time of the flashback, remind yourself that what you have experienced is a memory. Tell yourself you are safe.

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.

Look at colours and objects around you. Look at people and buildings etc. Notice what you are wearing and if possible look at something that makes you feel good, e.g. an object, photo, plant etc. – anything that makes you feel safe and brings positive memories to you. Do not choose an item you had at the time of the abuse.

Remember to keep breathing

Breathe in deeply and let it out slowly. Keep doing this until you feel calmer. Breathing will help especially if you are panicking. Remind yourself this will pass and you will be okay, this will pass.

Don't fight the flashback

Although this may feel difficult, try to breathe deeply and let the memory surface. Using alcohol, 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 in the long term if you can manage to avoid coping with flashbacks in these ways.

If you try to ignore or push away emerging memories they are likely to feel stronger and more powerful as they fight for recognition.

Remind yourself that this is a memory

This is something in the past that has already happened to you and you have survived it. Reassure yourself that you are not being hurt in the present, even though it may feel as though it is happening now.

It is vital to keep reminding yourself that you came through it.

Give yourself time and space to recover

Reliving memories can be painful and exhausting. It may take several hours or days for you to feel okay again, but you will. 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 if this isn't what you want to do.

Write about your memory

If you feel able to, write down what you remember from the flashback. This helps to "get it out" and is a good way of processing what's happened to you. You could use a journal or diary.

Useful things to write about may include what you remember, how you felt, any sounds you recall, pictures, sensations, smells etc. You could also reflect on how you feel in the here and now.

Talk about the flashback

Even though you may feel like keeping it all in, it can be really helpful if you share the flashback with a supportive person. In talking it through you may gain more insight and it might help you ground yourself in the here and now.

Remember, what happened to you was not your fault and you can get support with how you are feeling. Give yourself permission to receive support and understanding from others.

Be proud of yourself

You have experienced trauma and you have survived. You are doing well.



Artwork created by a woman who used RCTN services

#WEBELIEVEYOU

0191 222 0272
enquiries@rctn.org.uk

www.rctn.org.uk

Helpline & Email Support

0800 035 2794 or emailsupport@rctn.org.uk
Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday 6pm - 8.30pm and
Friday 11am – 2pm

Charity no: 1138149

Company no: 7285969

