

Dealing with flashbacks



Flashbacks are uninvited guests. They can arrive suddenly and out of the blue. Their effects can be powerful and distressing. Having to cope with them can be frustrating and, at times, even embarrassing. Understanding your flashbacks better and learning ways to manage them can help a lot.

What is a flashback?

Having flashbacks is a normal reaction to a frightening and overwhelming event (or events) that you've been through, recently, some months ago, or even years ago. A flashback feels as though you're back in the middle of your traumatic experience or reliving some aspect of it. It can seem like it's still happening or happening all over again. This re-experiencing can be in vivid detail.

A flashback can mimic the original traumatic event because it causes a very similar level of stress in your body. As you begin to sense fear and threat, your brain gets reactivated within seconds. The same hormones get released through your body that did when the trauma happened, such as adrenalin and cortisol. Your heart beats faster and your muscles and body systems react like they did at the time. Your brain is trying to protect you as it puts you into survival mode and you flee (run away), freeze or fight back against the threat you think is there. All these instinctive and automatic high-stress reactions affect you physically. They also affect your thoughts and feelings and how you behave during that flashback.



After trauma, we can have deep wounds that we can't see... but they can hurt us a great deal.

A flashback can last seconds, minutes or even hours. They can happen any time and anywhere, including at work, in social situations, or during nightmares. They can happen to anyone after traumatic situations of any kind.

During a flashback it can be difficult and confusing to connect back to the present moment and to what is real. As a flashback ends, it will usually take some moments or minutes for a person to fully recognise where they are, who they are with, and that they are safe.

What can trigger them?

Flashbacks can be set off subconsciously by anything that relates to your five senses – things you see, hear, touch, smell or taste. These 'triggers' can bring back distressing and frightening memories that re-activate your brain's survival mode. For example, a photo, a place, someone's face, a song, the sound something makes, words you hear, a certain meal, a familiar smell, an object you see, a pain or body sensation you get, or a certain date.

Why do they happen?

During any trauma our brains become highly stressed. Flashbacks and other post-trauma reactions are not about a person refusing to let go of the past. They are symptoms of a brain that's trying to process the overwhelming things that happened. Traumatic memories can get tangled up. How the brain stores them can get confused. Some memories can't be easily recalled. Research is now finding out a lot more about how complex and problematic traumatic memories can be.

CONTACT

Victim Support

Get Help: 0800 VICTIM (0800 842 846)
victimsupport.org.nz



For most people, flashbacks gradually decrease over time as a person's brain recognises the threat has passed, gets out of survival mode and re-balances itself. For some people, the impact of trauma can be more complicated. As their brain tries to bring the traumatic memories together and heal, regular and troubling flashbacks continue. In this situation, people can benefit from having professional assistance to help their brain find ways to get back into balance again.

What helps?

Your best first response is to ground yourself

Use your five senses to connect you with the here and now. Look around you. Name and count the things you can see and their colours. Touch something, like the ground, your clothes, or a piece of furniture. What does it feel like? What noises can you hear nearby? Are they loud or quiet? Taste some food or a drink. What can you smell around you? These simple grounding exercises are very effective.

Use self talk

Tell yourself key messages, such as:

I'm having a flashback. It's a normal response to an extraordinary traumatic event that happened in the past. It's not actually happening now. I am completely safe. It will pass soon. I will be okay.

Say them aloud if you can. Repeat them when you need to. Find words that work for you.

Take notice of the present

Look for things from the present which reassure you that you're not back in the past, such as the date and time, the people you are with, where you are or what you're wearing. Perhaps carry or wear something meaningful that reminds you of the present, such as a piece of jewellery, a photo, or something written on a small card.

Find a comforting place

It may help to sit or stand somewhere quietly for a while. Perhaps wrap a coat or blanket around yourself, listen to music, hold onto something special, be with someone you trust, or get outside into nature.

Breathe

Take several slow, deep belly breaths. Breathe in slowly through your nose, pause, then breathe out slowly through your mouth. Concentrate on breathing deeply, in and out, moving your belly up and down.

Deep breathing, at any time, can calm you and help you feel more in control. In anxious times, our breaths are usually shallow and fast.

Move

Even small movements, like wiggling your toes and fingers, helps. Clap or rub your hands together. Keep your eyes open. Sit or stand upright if possible. Stretch. Stamp your feet. Walk around.

Relax your muscles

Gradually move down through your body and tense different muscles as hard as you can for a slow count of five, and then relax them. Move on to the next muscle area. Focus on what you're doing. Try breathing in as you squeeze the muscles and then breathe out as you relax them. This is called progressive muscle relaxation.

Use distractions

Count backwards from 100. Name all your friends and family. Get a drink of water. Look out the window. Talk to someone. Think about what you've got planned for later that day or what you're looking forward to in the future. Listen to a go-to music playlist that calms or encourages you.

Looking after yourself well needs to be your daily priority.



What helps? (continued)

Give yourself time to recover

Flashbacks can leave you disoriented for a while and drain your energy. Take things slowly. Ground yourself. Breathe deeply. It might take a few minutes until you can fully concentrate on the next thing. This is normal. Rest if you can.

Use support

It helps to have ongoing emotional and practical support from family, whānau and friends. Tell those you trust about what you're dealing with. Flashbacks, especially if they keep happening, can affect your mental health significantly.

For professional support and treatments, see your doctor, a counsellor or psychologist, your local mental health team, or phone or text 1737, a national health and well-being helpline.

Keep looking after yourself

Show yourself kindness, understanding and compassion. Don't speak negatively to yourself.

Eat healthily, drink a good amount of water, get regular rest and sleep, exercise, and do the things you enjoy.

Keep connecting with your family, whānau and friends. If sleep is a problem, perhaps because you're fearing night-time flashbacks, talk with your doctor and learn some ways to get good sleep.

Avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope, as this can cause further problems and delay your recovery. Self-care is self-respect. Looking after yourself well needs to be your daily priority.

Learn what your triggers are and make yourself a practical action plan

If you sense a flashback coming, what will you do? Start deep breathing, begin your grounding exercises and do some self-talk to help keep you in the present. What will you do afterwards to recover well?

Be patient

Traumatic situations put your brain and your body through a lot. It's normal for recovery after trauma to take some time.

Practice

Like with any skills, all these strategies will work better when you give them some practice. Try them all out. Find the ones that work well for you and use them. They will help build your resilience and your confidence.

Remember

Having some ongoing responses to a traumatic experience is normal. It's also normal for healing after trauma to happen gradually – little by little. It's an ongoing, daily process. As you do heal, you'll gradually get fewer flashback reactions and ones you do have will lessen in their intensity. You won't forget what happened, and you'll probably always find some of the memories difficult, but you will become better able to manage them. By using the above tips, you're learning to actively cope and taking some positive and wise actions to improve things for yourself.

“Flashbacks are annoying and can make me feel out of control. They're hard to explain to people who say, 'just get over it'. I'm learning to ground myself better and they're not as frequent or intense now, finally!”



My self-care action plan

How will I look after myself physically?

How will I look after myself psychologically?

How will I look after myself spiritually?

How will I look after myself socially?

My support crew

Who do you most enjoy spending time with? Who can you always talk to? Who provides practical support?
Who do you most trust? Who always makes you laugh?

