

Dealing with flashbacks after a traumatic event



Information for patients

Department of Psychological Services



PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



A note on distress

It is possible that when you first read this booklet you may feel upset. This is a normal reaction. It could be that reading this reminds you of your traumatic event.

If you feel that you are getting too upset, put the booklet down and do something else. You can return to it another time when you feel able to. If you find that every time you try to read this booklet you experience very strong feelings, such as a racing heart or vivid flashbacks where you feel like you are losing touch with reality, it may be that you need help in working through your traumatic experience. We advise you to discuss this with your doctor.

What are flashbacks? (2)

After a traumatic experience, such as being rushed to hospital with a serious illness, or being involved in a road traffic accident, many people feel anxious because they find themselves re-experiencing the event as if it were happening all over again. This is called having a flashback. It can be frightening and distressing.

Flashbacks can happen in a number of ways:

- When unwanted pictures or thoughts suddenly pop into your mind
- When you find that particular sights, sounds or smells remind you of the event, for example the sound of ambulance sirens or the memory of the operating theatre

Why do I have flashbacks?

Flashbacks make you re-experience your traumatic event and they are part of the body's natural way of coming to terms with, or getting used to, very frightening events.

Flashbacks can be very upsetting and frightening. They can happen whether you want them to or not. They can often be triggered by memories or situations that remind you of the traumatic event.

You may come to feel that you have no control over what you are feeling, thinking and experiencing during the day or night. You may also find that you have some very real physical symptoms associated with your flashbacks.

What are the physical symptoms of a flashback? (2)

Re-experiencing the traumatic event as if it were happening all over again, can make you feel very anxious. When you feel anxious, your body will respond with physical symptoms of anxiety, for example you may get:

- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest
- Palpitations
- Increased heart rate
- Sweating
- Feeling restless and on edge
- Shaking
- Trembling
- Dizziness
- Muscle tension
- Feeling sick
- Loss of appetite

Why do I have these physical symptoms?

You have these symptoms because your body thinks that you are in danger and responds with a 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze' response. Survival instinct takes over and you either 'fight' the source of danger, or you run away from it ('flight') or you 'freeze' in fear. Either way, our body responds by releasing a hormone called adrenaline that gives us the energy to fight, run or freeze to try to protect ourselves from the danger⁽²⁾.

During a flashback your body responds as if it were in danger, even though you are no longer in the traumatic situation. This is why, when you have a flashback, you experience these physical symptoms.

Will I get over the flashbacks?

Flashbacks are a sign that your mind is still processing the effects of the traumatic event. Sometimes this processing can take time, and it may require professional help. When processing starts to take place, the feelings and symptoms associated with the flashback gradually reduce and memories fade.

Dealing with your flashbacks

There are some general things that you can do that will help towards your recovery. These include:

- Talking or writing about the event
- Keeping your mind and body active
- Regular relaxation
- Learning to understand your flashbacks
- Learning techniques to deal with flashbacks as they happen
- Dealing with flashbacks at night

Talking or writing about the event

Only begin to tell or write down your story when you feel ready. Mild to moderate levels of distress are to be expected at the beginning of this process, especially if your trauma has happened recently. However, if you feel too overwhelmed to talk about your experiences on your own, this may be the time to ask your GP or another professional for help.

How does talking/writing help? (1,2)

Although you might want to forget about what you've been through, talking about it with somebody else or writing about it is very important. Many people avoid talking about their experiences because they fear that their distress will "take over". However, talking or writing about your experiences is often the first step to recovery. This is because talking and writing can:

- Help you to make sense of your experience. You can fill in bits of information that are missing. It helps you to see your experience clearly and may help you see it from a different angle. Other people's opinions can also be useful to help you take a different perspective.
- Help the event become less distressing for you. The more you tell your story, the more you adjust to it and the less distressing it becomes. At the start, you may feel anxious, but the more you do it, the less anxious you feel.
- Help to stop intrusive thoughts going around and around inside your head⁽¹⁾.

How do I go about telling my story? (2)

Start gradually by just outlining what happened. As this becomes easier, fill in some more details. Try to talk through or write things down in the order that they happened; you might talk or write about what was happening in the time before and after the event too.

Finally, tell your story with as much detail as you can, for instance, try to write or talk about what you were thinking and feeling at the time. Remember, each time you tell your story the easier it becomes.

If you have chosen to talk to someone, choose someone you trust and that you feel can cope with your story. Sometimes some stories are so distressing that people decide to tell a professional person rather than someone they already know well.

Do I have to tell my story to a person?

No. You could keep a diary, write a blog, or think of other creative ways to convey your story in a more personal way, such as through art or music etc. Recording your story this way allows you to re-visit it several times and gradually add more details if you wish.

Keeping active

Try to keep involved in activities that you find enjoyable. It helps if they are relaxing and provide an opportunity for you to concentrate at the same time, for example by exercising, reading, watching TV, doing crosswords, drawing or painting. It is important to try different things to find out what works for you. Gradually increase the length of time that you spend on these activities.

However, remember to keep a balance. Being too active can be a way of avoiding thinking about the event, which can be unhelpful if it becomes a long-term strategy.

Relaxing

Reducing your general stress levels will help to reduce flashbacks. You may find it useful to learn relaxation and deep breathing skills.

Relaxation training can take two forms. In one, there is a focus on physical relaxation (tensing and then relaxing the muscles in your body). In the other, called mental relaxation, there is a focus on creating a peaceful and soothing image in your mind. Both can work well.

When we are physically relaxed, mental relaxation follows and vice versa. To help you relax you might want to try one of the many relaxation CDs available in shops and/or your local library. Alternatively, or as a starting point, you could try the exercise below:

- Take a slow breath in through your nose.
- Hold your breath for two seconds then breathe out slowly for six seconds while saying the word "relax" to yourself.
- As you breathe out, imagine all the stress leaving your body.
- Try this again with your hand on your stomach and try to breathe in toward your hand. Breathing from your stomach (abdomen) instead of your chest is a good way to deepen your breathing.
- Breathe out saying "relax" to yourself and imagine the stress leaving your body.
- Repeat this until you feel more relaxed.

If you start feeling dizzy you are breathing too fast or too deep, so try to slow your breathing down⁽²⁾.

Learning to understand your flashbacks ⁽¹⁾

Try to get to know your flashbacks. "The more you allow yourself to know and understand your flashbacks, the more you will be able to master them and feel in control" ⁽¹⁾.

Try to work out what triggers your flashbacks. What starts a flashback is different for everyone. It could be a sound, for example an ambulance siren, the smell of hospital cleaning fluid or seeing something on the TV that reminds you of your trauma.

You may find it helps you to understand your flashbacks better if you keep a daily diary about them. This will help you to identify your particular triggers and reactions. Once you have a greater understanding of your flashbacks, you might find that this gives you more control over them.

Initially, in some people, the flashbacks can be very intense. If this applies to you, be gentle on yourself, and try not to seek out or put yourself in situations that you know will trigger a flashback.

However, it is very important to remember that this strategy of avoiding triggers to flashbacks should only be used in very limited situations, like the one described above. Over time you will need to start facing situations that trigger flashbacks and to start to work through them. The sections in this leaflet on 'Talking or writing about the event', 'Learning techniques to deal with flashbacks as they happen' and 'Dealing with flashbacks at night', should help you with this.

Learning techniques to deal with flashbacks as they happen

Flashbacks can feel overwhelming because the feelings that come with them are often very intense and unpredictable and can leave you feeling confused, frightened or disconnected from reality.

What can I do when I am having a flashback? ⁽¹⁾

There are specific 'grounding techniques' that you can use when you are having a flashback. These are things that you can do to help you to keep your awareness in the present rather than being taken over by past memories of the trauma. Using these techniques may reduce the intensity of the flashback. Four such techniques are listed below⁽¹⁾:

1. Keep yourself grounded in the present⁽¹⁾

When the flashback happens, try to remind yourself of the 'here and now' by telling yourself (silently) where you are, what day it is, your name or say a favourite poem to yourself. This will help you to stay connected in the present and not 'slip' into the past memory of the trauma.

2. **When you notice the first signs of a flashback, focus on any object that you can see in your immediate environment**

Describe this object to yourself in as much detail as you can, for example: What colour is it? How big or small is it? Is it rough or smooth?⁽¹⁾

3. **Create safe and relaxing images⁽¹⁾**

Think of a safe and relaxing place and picture this in your mind. Scenes may be actual places you know that feel safe and relaxing or they may be scenes that you create to feel tranquil and safe. The more senses that you include into your image, the more relaxing it is likely to be for you. For example, if you imagine yourself walking along a beautiful beach, you may want to pay special attention to the sound of the seagulls, the brilliant sunlight being reflected on the water, the different blue and green colours of the sea, the smell of the sea air, the warm breeze as it touches your skin. Using this kind of imagery is more likely to be helpful if you practise it on a daily basis.

4. **Use a grounding object**

Find an object, something meaningful to you. Carry this with you all the time and feel, touch and/or smell it when you start to feel that you are having a flashback. This will help you to focus on the present and to feel calmed⁽¹⁾.

Dealing with flashbacks in the night ⁽¹⁾

There are a number of things that you can do to help yourself if you have trouble with flashbacks at night.

Try the following:

- Be prepared to deal with bad nightmares by re-connecting yourself to the here and now. Have a cool flannel handy by the bed if you wake up in a cold sweat.
- Turn the light on and get out of bed.
- Use some of the grounding techniques mentioned above to help bring you back to the present and to calm you.
- Use additional calming techniques, for example going through some relaxation exercises or playing relaxing music.
- Return to bed. If you haven't got back to sleep within 30 minutes, get up and do something relaxing, like reading, and then try to go back to sleep again.

It is important to take one small step at a time. If these techniques don't work for you straight away, it is worth persevering with them. It is important to give yourself time. Take credit for changes that take place and the progress you make.

When do I need to seek help

Flashbacks, like other post-traumatic reactions, need to be worked through slowly. For most people they will begin to reduce after 3 to 6 months have passed. There is no firm rule, and everyone is different. Sometimes being in hospital for a long time can delay the process significantly. However, if your flashbacks are still present after this time or they become worse, then it is important that you ask for help. It is also important to seek help if:

- You notice increases in activities you do to cope with stress, such as eating, smoking or drinking, or you start to take drugs (without medical supervision) to cope with your feelings
- You feel that you want to harm yourself or others around you
- You notice you are taking unnecessary or dangerous risks
- You feel you have nowhere to turn
- You feel too overwhelmed to talk about your experience even after some time has passed since the event

How do I seek help?

There is a range of help available.

- If you are still attending hospital for treatment, you can discuss how you feel with a member of staff.
- There are psychological services based at the Northern General Hospital. A psychologist can help you to understand and work through your difficulties. You could discuss the possibility of your referral to a psychologist with a member of staff.
- Talk to your doctor about how you are feeling. They will be able to refer you to an appropriate person.

Further suggested reading

"Overcoming Traumatic Stress" by Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore, 1999. Published by Constable & Robinson Ltd.

"Trauma is Really Strange" by Steve Haines & Sophie Standing, 2015. Published by Singing Dragon.

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1. Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore 1999. *Overcoming Traumatic Stress*. Publishers: Constable and Robinson Ltd.
2. Meaghan O'Donnell, Mark Creamer & Ludwig 2001. *Getting Over It*. Traumatic Injury Project. Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, University of Melbourne.
3. Jenny Donnison. *Understanding and Coping with the Effects of Trauma*, Patient Information Booklet PD2652. Produced within Psychological Health Sheffield, Sheffield Care Trust.
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Where extracts have been taken from these sources we reference them with the corresponding number (1, 2, 3, 4).

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