

SAAVI Office

Sexual Assault and Anti Violence Information

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FLASHBACKS

Flashbacks are memories of past traumas. They may take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, body sensations, feelings, or the lack of them (numbness). Many times there is no actual visual or auditory memory. One may have the sense of panic, of being trapped, of feeling powerless with no memory stimulating it. These experiences can also happen in dreams.

To survive the trauma we had to insulate ourselves from the emotional and physical horrors of the trauma and were unable to express feelings and thoughts during that time. It is as though we put that experience into a time capsule until it comes out full-blown in the present.

When that part comes out we are experiencing the past as if it were happening today. As the flashback occurs, we forget that we can reassure ourselves that we are now protected. The intense feelings and body sensations occurring are so frightening because the feelings/sensations are not related to the reality of the present and many times seem to come from nowhere.

We begin to think we are crazy and fear telling anyone (including our therapist) of these experiences. We feel out of control and at the mercy of our experiences.

We begin to avoid situations and stimuli that we think triggered it. Many times flashbacks occur during any form of sexual intimacy, or when we see a person who resembles our assailant, or when we are in a situation that stirs up similar trapped feelings (a confrontation or aggressive people).

If you are feeling small or powerless, you are experiencing a flashback.

If you are experiencing stronger feelings than are called for in the present situation, you are experiencing a flashback.

What Helps

1. ***Tell Yourself That You Are Having A Flashback:*** Learn to recognize its subtle body signs.
2. ***Remind Yourself That The Worst Is Over:*** The feeling and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past. The actual event took place long ago and you survived. Now is the time to let out that terror, rage, hurt, and/or panic. Now is the time to respect your experience.
3. ***Get Grounded:*** Stamp your feet on the ground if you have to so that you know you can get away if you need to. You couldn't get away before...now you can!

4. **Breath:** When we get scared we stop normal breathing. As a result our body begins to panic from the lack of oxygen. Lack of oxygen in itself 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. Breathing deeply means putting your hand on your diaphragm and breathing deeply enough so that your diaphragm pushes against your hand and then exhaling so that the diaphragm goes in.
5. **Reorient To The Present:** Begin to use your five senses in the present. Look around and see the colors in the room, the shapes of things, the people, 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 supporting you.
6. **Getting In Touch With Your Need For Boundaries:** Sometimes when we are having a flashback we lose the sense of where we leave off and the world begins as if we do not have skin. Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or stuffed animal, go to bed, sit in a closet, any way that you can feel yourself truly protected.
7. **Get Support:** Depending on your situation you may need to be alone or may want someone near you. In either case, it is important that your close ones know about flashbacks so that they can help with the process, whether that means letting you be by yourself or by being there with you.
8. **Take Time To Recover:** Sometimes flashbacks are very powerful. Give yourself the time to make the transition from this powerful experience. Don't expect yourself to jump into activities right away. Take a nap, or a warm bath, or some quiet time. Be Kind and gentle with yourself.
9. **Honor Yourself:** Appreciate yourself for having survived a horrible experience.
10. **Be Patient:** it takes time to heal the past.
11. **Find A Competent Therapist Or Self-Help Group:** Look for a therapist who understands the process of healing from sexual assault. A therapist can be a guide, a support, a coach in this healing process. You do not have to do it alone. It can be healing to share your experience with others who understand so deeply what you are going through.
12. **Know You Are Not Crazy...You are healing!**

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