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### **A workshop for people who have experienced sexual abuse and for those that support them:**

If you experience flashbacks this information may be able to help you...

It's been a very romantic evening. Ice cream eaten, coffee drunk, you're holding hands in the moonlight and your partner leans towards you. As you move in for the kiss you feel ... you feel ... a strong sudden urge to throw up. Where did that feeling come from? What is happening to you?

Your flatmate and you are in a discussion about the ever rising pile of washing up in the kitchen. Your flatmate's voice starts to rise and the "discussion" becomes more heated. As you are about to make your point suddenly your flatmate's face is gone and for a split second is replaced by someone else's – the person who abused you over twenty years ago. Then just as abruptly the picture is gone. What is going on? Where did that image come from? Did you make it up or are you losing it?

If you have watched the cult TV series "Life On Mars" or "Ashes to Ashes" you will have seen Flashbacks used very effectively. Sudden unexpected images or pictures would come into the main character's minds triggered by something in their present life and they were immediately transported back in time to their past life. Although different in some respects this is quite a good analogy of what happens when we have experienced trauma as children and the memories of that trauma come intruding into our lives today as adults. These sudden unexpected memories are known as "Flashbacks".

Flashbacks occur to people when they have experienced a traumatic incident and are the memories of that trauma that have not been processed. The World Health Organization (1992) describes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a "Delayed or protracted response to a stressful event (of either brief or long duration) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature... Typical features include episodes of repeated reliving of the trauma in intrusive memories ('flashbacks')".

If you have experienced trauma when you were growing up you may experience flashbacks. This is because often during abuse in order to protect from the horror of what is going on, memories of the abuse are kept inside. These feelings and thoughts remain locked inside until a 'trigger' from the present releases the past memory. As result a flashback memory can feel like you are experiencing the traumatic event from your past now – there is a blurring between past and present – and this can feel extremely frightening.

### **Flashbacks and can make us feel very unsafe or out of control.**

Flashbacks come in different forms – they can be images, strong feelings, smells, numbness, pictures, thoughts that come into suddenly into our minds. During flashbacks you can even lose touch with the here and now.

Some important features of flashbacks and traumatic memories are:

Fragmented and Not Organised: Memory doesn't have a beginning middle and end.  
Not whole and complete memory fragmented so you only remember isolated bits.

**Recalled Involuntarily:** Bits of the memory pop into your mind even though you don't want them or consciously decide to think about them – makes you feel you have no control over them.

**Triggered by Situations:** They are triggered by smells, sights, noises – upsetting as you cannot always control your environment.

**Not Time Tagged:** When you remember it does not feel as though it happened in the past, but it is happening now. Even though you know it is a long time ago it feels as though it is happening in the present your body experiences the same emotions and so you feel as though you are still in danger.

**It is frozen in time:** The memory remains exactly as it was when you first formed it. Unlike every day memories which are updated when new information comes in about the event. Traumatic memories do not change the emotion as you experienced in the traumatic event. So you feel the same feeling at the time of the event.

(Source: Adapted from Recovering From Trauma Using Compassion Focused Therapy: Deborah Lee Published by Robinson 2014 page 48/49)

**Flashbacks also come in different forms.** They can be images, strong feelings, smells, numbness, pictures, nightmares and thoughts that come suddenly into our minds:

### **Pictures or images flashback**

These are snapshots memories that came up very suddenly and then are gone again. These can be triggered by something in your environment e.g. a perfume, or a sound that your subconscious recognises and emerges into your conscience in a picture form. This can also happen with sounds and even smells.

### **Feeling Flashback**

A "Feeling" flashback is often registered as an extreme response to a situation or person. This can bring on a very strong feeling for example extreme rage or pain or fear seemingly out of nowhere.

### **Body Flashback**

This is a physical feeling and response to what has happened after the event that is triggered by something in your present life e.g. touch or sexual contact. This could be a feeling of nausea or repulsion or tightness in the body.

### **Acting Out Memory**

This may not be like an actual "Flashback" but it is important because it is often a repetition of a pattern of behaviour or situation – when you don't have any insight or knowledge as to the root event. An example of this is washing excessively but not knowing why you are led to do this.

When you experience flashbacks it can be as though you are experiencing the abuse again in the present, and you lose touch with reality. One way you can help yourself if you are experiencing the Flashback to return to the present is to practice "Grounding" yourself. This means you are bringing yourself from your past memory into the here and now.

Be prepared:

You can practice your response to flashbacks:

- During a flashback to stop or reduce its impact
- As a preparation for a situation that you are facing that you think may trigger a flashback
- As a morning ritual so that it becomes automatic (in the way fire drills prepare people for what to do in the event of a fire)

**Getting Grounded:** If you are experiencing a flashback these grounding ideas may help you to return from the flashback to the present.

**Feet First:** Put your feet on the floor firmly – stamp if you like – reminding yourself of the here and now.

**Breath Deep:** Be aware of your breathing. When we are fearful we can start to breath very quickly. Take a few minutes to just breath in and out slowly – count if that helps. e.g.

For example breath four counts in and six counts out. Stephen Porges Polyvagal Theory tells us that by taking longer to exhale you'll aid your body's parasympathetic response (the part of your autonomic system that encourages you to rest and relax).

**Into Today:** Use your senses to bring you into the present.

**Look:** Look at something on the wall or look at some calming pictures on your phone

**Listen:** Switch on your phone and listen to music or focus on the noises outside

**Feel:** Touch your arms, hands, furniture – reminding you of where you are now.

**Taste:** Carry a sweet to suck or perhaps some chocolate

**Smell:** Try sniffing perfume or a bottle of aromatherapy essential oil

**Remind Yourself:** This is just a memory – it is not actually happening. Focus on who you are now. If it helps talk to the frightened “child” part of you and assure him or her that you (your healthy adult self) can take care of themselves now.

**Hold Tight:** In a strong flashback it is easy to lose perspective and even not know where you end and the rest of the world begins. Holding a blanket round yourself or hugging a pillow can help.

**Take Time:** Don't push yourself to do things after a flashback – be kind to yourself and look after yourself. If you can, do something you find comforting.

**Seek Safety:** Find a safe space if you are not in one.

**Identify The Emotion:** Try and name the emotion e.g. I feel afraid. I feel angry

**Speak Clearly To Yourself:** State clearly to yourself that these symptoms are in reaction to a memory.

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I am feeling scared and my heart is racing because I am remembering an attack when I was 10. At the same time I am looking around my room. I am seeing... I am feeling. I can also hear... I can also see on my watch that the date is 2021. So I know that the attack is not happening now but it happened 30 years ago.

**Get Support:** If you feel you would like to, let your friends know what you are going through and let them help you by talking to you, touching you – whatever helps to remind you of who you are now

**Write it:** Flashbacks feel frightening because they can seem to come out of nowhere. Write down the flashback when you feel ready and what happened directly beforehand. This will help you identify the “trigger” and will help you gain understanding of where the memory came from.

**Share it:** Consider joining a self help group or finding a good therapist to help you through this time.

*(Source: Adapted from ideas on Worcester Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre website [www.wrsasc.org.uk](http://www.wrsasc.org.uk))*

Although flashbacks are frightening they mean that the memories are coming up for a reason.

Often this is that you are ready to talk through the memory and it is another step towards growth and healing. As we continue to progress and talk about our memories, suffering and trauma – the flashbacks get less and less – and the painful memories no longer dominate us but rather we call the shots and control them.