

# Flashbacks and Nightmares Stabilisation Pack



**Cwm Taf University Health Board –  
Psychological Therapies Department**

# Flashbacks and Nightmares

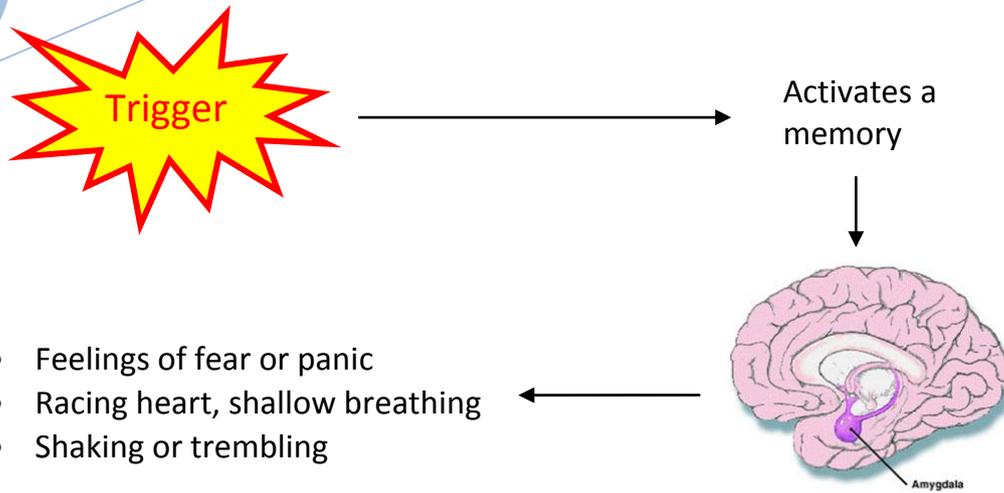
## What are flashbacks?

In the section titled 'How our mind and body react to trauma', we discussed how the brain deals with trauma memories in a different way to everyday memories. Because trauma isn't fully processed, current situations or events that remind us of the original events can trigger what are called 'flashbacks'. Flashbacks are normal responses to trauma. It was helpful at the time for us to be in a state of alertness, prepared for danger, and our brains have learned to make us very alert again if we come across any reminder of that danger, such as images, tastes, smells, sounds, emotions and sensations. This was an important way of protecting ourselves in the past. It makes sense that our bodies have evolved on a 'better safe than sorry' rule, so that they respond very quickly and automatically to anything that might be a threat. However, sometimes our brains and bodies continue to react in this way when the danger is over. This can interfere with our lives for years afterwards, and can be very distressing.

In normal situations, a part of our brain called the hippocampus 'tags' or labels our memories with information about where and when they occurred. Unfortunately when our 'threat system' is active, the hippocampus doesn't always tag the memories in this way, and so it may feel as if the events are actually happening now. In addition, the memories do not get stored or processed in the same way as everyday memories. They are fragmented and may pop back into our minds unexpectedly and outside our control.

A part of our brain called the amygdala prepares us to react to threat by, for example, releasing stress hormones. However, the amygdala cannot distinguish between real external threats, such as a violent person, and internal threats, such as a memory. This means that it will respond to reminders of the traumatic event as if the trauma was happening right now. Obviously this can be very distressing, because it stirs up all the feelings and physical reactions (such as panic and racing heartbeat) that we had when the trauma really was happening.

## Flashbacks and Nightmares



Flashbacks sometimes include bodily sensations such as being pushed or choked, or having certain smells or tastes. These are called 'somatic memories.' It seems that our bodies can recall traumatic events even if we do not always have detailed conscious memories of them. At other times we may have vivid and unwanted memories of the trauma but without feeling as if it is happening to us in the present. This is called an 'intrusive memory' and can also be very upsetting, and frightening.

### What triggers a flashback?

Flashbacks can be triggered by lots of different things, such as a smell, a news item on the TV, or a person who is a reminder of a traumatic event. Sometimes flashbacks start after the death of the abuser, or when you become a parent, or when your child reaches the same age as you were when you were abused, and so on. It can be helpful to work out what your triggers are, so you can make more sense of why you are having a flashback at a particular time or in a particular situation. However, sometimes people have flashbacks when there is no obvious trigger. You do not need to be able to identify all your triggers in order to deal with flashbacks.

When we start processing trauma we may experience an increase in flashbacks. Although this is difficult, it can be seen as a sign that our mind and body are starting to heal from the trauma.

**Use this box to write down what triggers your flashbacks.**

## How can we cope with flashbacks?

People can be reluctant to talk about flashbacks because it is distressing or embarrassing, and they may feel ashamed and self-blaming. However, letting someone you trust know that you have flashbacks can be the first step in helping you to gain support and to heal. There are many coping strategies that can help you manage flashbacks. None of them are a quick or easy answer, but they can all play a part in calming your body and mind, and teaching your brain that the danger is in the past, not in the present.

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### HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS:

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Find a safe and peaceful place where you feel comfortable, either sitting or lying down.

Remind yourself you are having a flashback, and that this is a normal response to trauma. You are not crazy. Flashbacks are common and you are healing.

Remember that the worst is over – what you are remembering happened in the past, and is not happening now. However terrible you feel now, you have survived, which means you can get through what you are remembering now.

Breathe calmly and slowly. Put your hand on the area above your belly button, and feel it go up and down as you take breaths in and out. Try counting to 5 as you breathe in, and to 5 as you breathe out. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

If the trauma happened when you were growing up, there will probably be a child part of you that feels frightened and alone. It is important that our 'adult' self reassures the 'child' part that they are safe now.

Have something comforting to hold or hug, such as a soft pillow or blanket, or a soft toy.

Have something soothing in your pocket or bag that you can hold for comfort, such as a small stone or crystal, or another object that reminds you of something or someone loving and reassuring.

Listen to calming music on your phone or CD player.

Make a soothing drink, such as hot chocolate or herbal tea.

If you have lost a sense of where your body ends and where the rest of the world begins, rub your body so you can feel it more clearly, or wrap a blanket around you so you can feel it.

Use the grounding techniques in the section on ‘Grounding.’

If there is someone around who is supportive, you might want to tell them that you are having a flashback, so they can prompt you to use your coping strategies and remind you that you are safe where you are now. You may want to agree in advance how you will tell someone that you are having a flashback, e.g. a word or sign.

Because flashbacks are such a powerful experience, it is important to be kind to yourself afterwards. This might mean having a relaxing bath, a sleep, a warm drink or just taking some quiet time for yourself. Remember that you deserve to be taken care of.

Use the ideas from any other sections in this manual that might be helpful – for example, ‘Mindfulness’, ‘Compassion’, ‘Soothing and Safety’.

### Develop your own script

Noticing the difference between the present and the past is not always easy during a flashback. We have to tell our minds and brains that we are safe in the present, and using the following script can help us do this. You might want to write your script out on a card and keep it with you so that you can use it when you need it. Remember that practising this when you feel safe will make it easier to use during a flashback.

- I am feeling (name the emotion, such as ‘frightened’)
- And I am sensing in my body (describe as many bodily sensations as you can)
- **Because** I am remembering (name the trauma by title only, no details)
- But at the same time I am here (name the place)
- And I am in (today’s date including day, month and year)
- and I can see (describe some of the things that you can see right now, in this place).....
- and I can hear.....
- and I can smell.....
- and so I know (name the trauma, again title only)
- is not happening now or any more

For example...

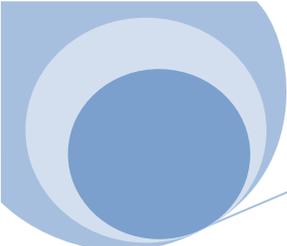
- I am feeling frightened
- And my heart is racing, I am shivering and sweating
- Because I am remembering
- the attack when I was 12 years old
- But at the same time I am in my living room
- And it is the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015
- And I can see my sofa, the cat, my daughter, the television
- I can hear the voices on the television and the rain on the window outside
- And I can smell the air freshener and coffee
- And so I know the attack was a long time ago and it is not happening again or any more.

## Nightmares

Nightmares, like flashbacks, are a normal response to trauma. They can be a way of remembering events that are too distressing to recall in the daytime. Unfortunately, nightmares can make it frightening to go to sleep, and you may be exhausted from disrupted nights. As with flashbacks, your mind and brain can gradually be trained to realise that the danger is in the past.

Some ideas for coping strategies are:

- Make your room feel as safe as possible. Have comforting things to hold or hug, such as a blanket or soft toy.
- Play calming music before you go to sleep, or if you wake.
- Have a drink ready by the bed.
- If you wake from a nightmare, it may help to turn your light on, look around the room and remind yourself where you are, using grounding techniques (see the section on 'Grounding.')
- As with the flashbacks, remind yourself that the fear you are feeling is from the past, not now, and that you have survived.
- Some people find it helpful to create a nurturing image of a person (real or imaginary) or a thing (an animal, a guardian angel etc) who is protecting them. See the section on 'Compassion.'
- If you find it hard to get back to sleep, it may help to play a DVD or read a story that is calming and distracting.



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**THIS SCRIPT CAN ALSO BE USED TO PREPARE YOURSELF BEFORE YOU  
GO TO BED:**

- I may wake in the night feeling.....
- And I may be sensing in my body.....
- Because I will be remembering (again by title no description).....
- At the same time I will look around where I am now in .....
- And I will see, smell, hear.....
- And so I will know <insert title> is not happening now/anymore. I have survived it and I am safe in the present.

Whether you have flashbacks, intrusive thoughts or nightmares or perhaps all of them, remember to notice and praise yourself for any steps you were able to take to cope with them, even if it was difficult and didn't take away all the fear. It takes time to re-train your mind but with patience and determination it can be done.

### **Reading and Resources**

This **website** has some useful suggestions about coping with flashbacks:

<http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/CopingwithFlashbacks.pdf>

There is a good explanation about the role of the brain in flashbacks in chapter 2 of **Deborah Lee** (2012) 'The Compassionate Mind Approach to Recovering from Trauma using Compassion Focused Therapy', London: Robinson.