

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet will help you understand flashbacks and how you might reduce and control them.*

Coping with flashbacks

What is a flashback?

A flashback is a memory that pops up in your consciousness. It may be triggered by something you're aware of, such as a smell or sound or you may have no idea why it's occupying your mind right now. It might last a moment or linger for weeks.

Flashbacks cannot physically hurt you

You may feel powerless as you cannot control when these memories emerge. It may feel odd but acknowledge them. Allow yourself to feel them. This will feel painful at first, but flashbacks will lose their intensity over time.

Strategies for dealing with flashbacks

Relaxing can help reduce the stress that comes with a flashback. Initially this will be hard, but the skill of relaxing will get easier by using the strategies on this list.

When you're stressed you can sometimes forget to breathe. Shift your attention away from the flashback and concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly.

Diverting your thoughts from the flashback to breathing and counting will calm you and help to ease the flashback from your mind.

- Remind yourself that the abuse is not happening now.
- If you're feeling pulled into the past, touch or grip something that feels safe — like a table, chair, a toy or a pet. This will ground you in the present.
- Find a safe place then breathe deeply and slowly. If you can't get to a safe place, imagine one. Or you could look at a photograph, a memento, an artwork or an inspirational quote. Try to carry something with you at all times to use as your catalyst for calm.
- Find or call your support person. If you can't contact them remember their support and encouragement. Think of what they'd say to you to help you feel stronger.
- Use the flashback protocol shown below. With practice working through these questions may help to lessen the intensity and frequency of your flashbacks.

Flashback protocol*

These questions will help you acknowledge your feelings and ground you in the present.

- **Right now, I'm feeling** (*describe your emotions, for example fear*)
- **I'm sensing in my body** (*describe your bodily sensations, for example nausea or butterflies in my stomach*)
- **Because I'm remembering** (*name the trauma only — do not go into details*)
- **I am looking around where I am now, in** (*the place you are now and the month and years*)
- **I can see** (*describe some things can see now*)
- **so, I know** (*name the trauma again*)
- **is not happening anymore.**

How to breathe deeply and slowly

Repeat the following sequence three times:

1. Close your mouth. Take a big, deep breath in and slowly count to three. Imagine your breath going all the way down into your stomach.
2. Pause for a count of one while holding that breath in.
3. Open your mouth and slowly let all your breath out while slowly counting to three.

It's up to you whether you keep your eyes open or not. If you do keep them open, try to focus on something that's pleasant not moving.

**Adapted from Rothschild, B (2000). The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment. New York: W.W.Norton*