

Dealing With Flashbacks

Some practical steps to help
you ride out flashbacks



Women's Stress Disorders Treatment Program

William S. Middleton VA Hospital
2500 Overlook Terrace
Madison, WI 53705
608-280-7084

What exactly is a flashback?

- ◆ Basically, a flashback is a time when you feel as though you are re-experiencing a stressful event.
- ◆ You might remember details of the event (like exactly what happened, or sounds and smells) as if you were back in that time again.
- ◆ Sometimes you don't recall details, but have the same feelings or sensations you had in the past.



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What causes a flashback?

Reminders of past stresses sometimes (not always) trigger a flashback. These reminders can range from events that are almost identical to the original stress, to those that don't have anything obvious in common with the past event, but which stir up the same feelings.



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What's an example of a similar experience?

- ◆ A woman who was raped by a brother who came into her bedroom at night may find that when her partner comes into their bedroom at night she begins re-experiencing that past event.
- ◆ A woman who was a nurse in a combat zone may find that caring for an ill partner triggers re-experiencing that past stress.



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What about underlying feelings or minor details?

- ◆ A woman who felt helpless to stop her parents from abusing her when she was a child may respond to the idea of anesthesia for surgery by having a flashback.
- ◆ A woman who survived a deadly tornado may begin to have a flashback when the air pressure changes on an airplane flight.



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Is there a good way to cope with this?

Yvonne Dolan, M.A., has developed a four step approach that many people have found helpful in coping with flashbacks.



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What are the steps for riding it out?

- Notice what you are **EXPERIENCING**
- Figure out what in this current situation is **SIMILAR** to the past, stressful situation
- Figure out what in this current situation is **DIFFERENT** from the past situation
- Decide what **ACTION** you want to take in this moment to help you feel better
- Let's look at it one step at a time.



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1. What are you experiencing?

- ◆ Notice and then describe to yourself what you are feeling .
- ◆ This could be a feeling word (for example, “angry” or “scared”).
- ◆ It might be a sensation in your body (for example, feeling like you can’t breathe, feeling nauseous, or feeling the urge to run).



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2. How is this current situation similar to your past situation?

- ◆ Is the setting or time of year similar?
- ◆ Are the sights, sounds or smells similar?
- ◆ If another person is involved, is s/he acting in a way similar to what happened in the past?
- ◆ Is what you are feeling similar to what you felt then? (For example, powerless or scared).



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3. What is different now?

- ◆ **What is different about you? (For example, you are older and have more safety options).**
- ◆ **What is different about this current setting? (For example, this is your adult bedroom, not your childhood bedroom).**
- ◆ **What is different about the person(s) involved? (For example, this person believes what you say and treats you with caring and respect).**



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4. What action can you take to feel better in this moment?

- ◆ If the flashback occurred because you are again in an unsafe situation, you must take whatever steps you can to increase your safety at this moment.
- ◆ If your current safety is not in danger, you may choose to do things to “ground” and reassure yourself.



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Some ways to help ground and reassure yourself

- Breathe. This is a very important step.
- Remind yourself of your current safety, of the presence of people in your life who respect and care for you, of options you have in this moment.
- Treat yourself kindly in a concrete way, like listening to soothing music, taking a warm bath, or watching a beautiful sunset. This will also help you stay in the present moment.



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Let's review the four steps

- Notice what you are **EXPERIENCING**.
- What is the **SAME** as in the past event?
- What is **DIFFERENT** than the past event?
- What **ACTION** can you take to feel better?



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