

## Flashbacks and nightmares

It is common for people who have experienced abuse in childhood to have 'flashbacks' about what happened to them. Flashbacks are very powerful memories which feel very real and can be very distressing. A survivor may feel like the traumatic event is taking place again and may even be able to smell scents, hear sounds or feel pain that they experienced at the time.

When someone experiences a distressing and traumatic experience the mechanism for processing memories can become overwhelmed and the mind is not able to process the experience, in the usual way. This means that the memory is still active and can be very easily triggered by anything that reminds you of what happened - this could be a place, person, smell or sound.

Survivors can also 'relive' what happened to them in nightmares or might dream about being trapped or chased by their abuser.

### If you experience a flashback or memory it can be helpful to:

- Remind yourself that what you are experiencing is only a memory or nightmare - you are safe now and no longer in danger.
- Go to a safe place and make yourself comfortable.
- Try some relaxation breathing - also known as diaphragmatic breathing - which can help to ease feelings of anxiety and panic. You can watch a video at [www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/breathing](http://www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/breathing)
- Try some mindfulness:
  - **Smell something** - an essential oil like lavender can help to calm and sooth.
  - **Taste something** - what does it taste like - is it sweet or spicy?
  - **Feel something** - touch some fabric or hold a warm drink.
  - **Listen** - identify the sounds can you hear around you or play some music.
  - **Sight** - what things can you see around you?
  - Find out more at [www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/be-mindful](http://www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/be-mindful)
- Refocus your thoughts to the present by stamping your feet and clapping your hands together.
- After experiencing a flashback be kind to yourself. Talk to someone you trust and or do something you enjoy.

### Some people also find it helps to:

- Talk through your experiences with a GP or [counsellor \(www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/counselling\)](http://www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/counselling).
- Express thoughts and feelings through activities like drawing, painting or creative writing.
- Write down the nightmare or flashback and make up a different ending - this can help you feel more in control over the memory.

## Dissociation

Dissociation is a feeling similar to that of 'day-dreaming' when you feel lost in your own thoughts and disconnected from events happening around you. The experience, however, can be more complete for people who have experienced child sexual abuse - sometimes survivors may have no memory of a period of time, feel as if they were outside of their body or may even adopt a different identity while experiencing dissociation.

As with flashbacks, dissociation may be triggered by something that reminded the person of the traumatic event. It is an automatic response acting like a fuse which is there to protect you from an electric shock during a power surge. It can become problematic, however, if it starts to happen too often.

Grounding techniques which can help to manage dissociative experiences. They work by helping you to keep connected to your senses and what is going on around you. Try some of the following and find out what works for you.

- Hold onto your chair or table, hold a cold glass of water, hold an ice cube, run your hands under some warm water, smell a flower, stretch out, rattle your keys.
- Look around you and describe in detail what you can see.
- Speak out loud - your name, age, where you were born, where you work, today's date.
- Watch a funny movie and laugh out loud.
- Say to yourself - I am here...., the date is ...., I am safe.
- Try some relaxation breathing - also known as diaphragmatic breathing - you can watch a video at [www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/breathing](http://www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/breathing)
- Mindfully eat a piece of fruit - think about how sweet and juicy it tastes.
- Describe to yourself an activity that you do every day - like making a cup of tea.
- Speak kindly to yourself - you are strong and can handle this.
- Plan to do something you enjoy.

**Keep practising!**