



Flashbacks and nightmares

It is common for people who have experienced very traumatic experiences 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. People who have experienced traumatic experiences may also 'relive' what happened in nightmares.

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
- 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
- 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).
- 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.