

Dealing with Flashbacks

Read: Many problems in living can be usefully organized under the heading of flashbacks. A flashback is a memory of a past injury, setback, or psychological trauma. The term “flashback” refers to the *reliving of the upsetting/fearful experience even though we are safely protected now*. It is important to remember that the response to a flashback is based on our instinctive, bodily response to intense threat. We are biologically programmed to respond in the following ways when threatened:

- Fight- also includes becoming argumentative or pushy and insistent
- Flee- escaping the threat through any means becomes the only concern
- Freeze- we might “lock up” physically, become still, or feel numb
- Fog- fogging is improperly using prescription drugs, alcohol, or street drugs

When we flash back our body also floods with very powerful stress hormones like adrenalin that may create symptoms such as stomach problems, headaches, etc.

Flashbacks might be visual images, sounds heard in our mind, smells, or kinesthetic. Kinesthetic flashbacks are body sensations that mimic our reaction to the initial trauma or setback. For example, a sinking feeling in our stomach occurring in the same location where something bad happened includes both the flashback (sinking feeling) and the trigger (the location). Mental images may also pop up along with the stomach upset. When the trauma is a crime or serious injury, both the triggers and flashbacks may become unconscious (we lose track of where they started). This occurs because of our basic drive to escape trauma, memories of it, and anything vaguely similar to it.

Practice: Below are some basic coping skills that can be learned and expanded until they build into a solid foundation.

1. Start to notice the smallest indication of the flashback. For example, ask yourself “*what’s bugging me right now, my reaction seems out of proportion?*”
2. When you tag the event as a flashback, respond by saying to yourself, “*I’m having a flashback, the worst is over.*”
3. Silly as it sounds, *stamp your feet* if alone or tap your non-dominant foot quickly if with others. This will help break up the fight, flee, freeze, fog pattern.
4. Make yourself *breathe normally* with a nice easy rhythm through your nose. Breathe in a way that fills the lower portions of your lungs.
5. Pull your shoulders down and back. *Try not to hunch over.*
6. Bring yourself into the present. “*5-4-3-2-1*” is a well-tested tool. This practice involves naming sights, sounds, and sensations around you. Begin by naming 5 sights of any type to yourself. For example, inside a room it could be a picture, chair, desk or lamp. Name each to yourself. Next name 5 sounds, for example, a radio, a car, a fan, etc. Then, name 5 sensations: feeling one’s foot in a shoe, one’s hands, the back pressing against a chair, etc. Now, restart but this time name 4 of each, then 3, then 2, then 1. *The goal is a complete return to the present* that is an important break from stress about the past trauma.
7. Act on your need for safety. A *short bathroom break* might help.
8. *Honor yourself* for surviving the trauma and coping better.

