



## **Sea Change**

# **Managing Flashbacks**



## What are flashbacks?

Anyone who has experienced a traumatic incident can experience flashbacks. This traumatic incident might range from having experienced a singular event such as a car crash, to witnessing multiple deaths, or rape or sexual abuse.

Flashbacks are a **memory** of a frightening or painful experience, which may have occurred in childhood or adult life.

Flashbacks can come in different forms. It can feel as if you are re-experiencing what originally happened.





## Flashbacks/memory

- A flashback is able to mimic the real thing because it evokes a similar level of stress in your body.
- The same hormones are released as they were at the time of your actual trauma.
- In reality, a flashback is not a repetition or replay of a past event; it is a memory of that event.
- This is crucial to keep repeating, a **flashback is a memory**. No matter how intense the flashback is or how much your body is going into the state it felt like at the time, it is a memory.
- Something which can help is interrupting the flashback and pulling your thoughts back to the present moment. Reminding yourself, “This is a memory, it is not happening now” puts it into the past tense and reminds that overwhelmed part of your brain that you are okay now.
- During a flashback you might see images, hear sounds or smells which enhance the feeling of re-living.
- Rothschild (2010) explains that in order to reduce how much they affect you, the flashback needs to be accurately put in date and time order.

(Rothschild, p.62, 2010)



## The use of language with flashbacks

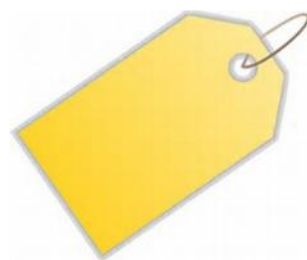
The librarian (hippocampus) part of the brain is the bit that stores your memory with a start, middle and end; putting that memory into date and time order.

By interrupting the flashback and bringing your thoughts back to the present moment it can help to calm down this part of the brain. Using language which states 'it is a memory', might help to calm down this part of the brain.

The 'Librarian' (hippocampus) during trauma can become overwhelmed by stress hormones- enough for it to stop working properly. The librarian gets confused and overwhelmed and does not know where to put different memories with accuracy. This means when a person has a flashback this part of the brain can feel the same things again, as all of the same stress hormones will overwhelm it again.

Therefore the librarian did not place the memory in its accurate date and time order- in context- therefore it has not been placed in the **past**

This means without the librarian labelling it and placing it in order with a beginning, middle and importantly **end**, the brain and body will continue to perceive trauma as on-going.







## Techniques for being in the here and now

In order to help check in with external senses and bring our attention to what is outside of us - (awareness of both external and internal senses) a useful tool can be 'room spotting'.

Practise

Practise this now. What do you see around you, and try out quickly spotting different things, colours number of things within the room.

### "I am remembering"

- It sounds simple and obviously it might take sometime, but recognition that a flashback is a memory will change your relationship to the past.

- We will now start to look at some exercises for helping build internal talk which puts the flashback into past tense and also building ability for awareness of the external.





## **Finding a 'Mantra' or saying, which will help anchor you to the here and now**

This is a simple concept but worth trying- try out being accurate- your flashback is a MEMORY, not a repeat of your trauma.

Next time you have a flashback remind yourself of this, in your head, using clear words, "this is a memory it is not happening now". You can try other methods such as: writing it down, recording this 'saying/mantra' onto your phone, "it is a memory it is not happening now". You might want a partner or friend to say this for you and you record their voice saying it to you, or you may wish to say it yourself.

### **Examples**

- "That was a memory. As real as it may have felt, it was not happening now" (Taken from 8 Keys to Trauma Recovery, Rothschild, 2010).
- "That felt really frightening, but it is not happening now. I am safe now, I am actually sitting..."

These examples highlight the need to both acknowledge what you are feeling but also to be factual and observe where you are now, in the moment, in the here and now. Acknowledge your feeling; e.g. I am scared, but then ground yourself and actually check around you to observe and bring your attention to the fact that right now in the present moment you are safe.



## Having your mantra available

When a flashback begins it might be difficult to remember the coping skills learnt in the last few pages.

To make it easier for yourself when you feel you are in a flashback, try out writing your mantra or some helpful grounding sentences down. Use sentences which 'anchor' you to the present time. Ones which remind you that it is not happening now, or remind you to change your focus to notice what is around you.

You can also use 'room spotting' or thinking about the present date and time now.

You can create a protocol or mantra card with reminders of these different techniques on, or you can say a sentence and record this onto your phone.







## Creating your Mantra or saying

- You can also make this very unique to you.
- You might say something such as 'I am now age .... The year is ... and what happened was ... years ago'.
- Or you might want to say 'I am now age ... I now have three cats and live ...'

Another technique you might want to try is saying this sentence both forwards and backwards. You can also try to think of it backwards. This will focus your attention to cognitive thinking (that thinking, not feeling part of your brain), therefore will stop the overwhelming emotional reaction continuing.





## Flashback protocol

1. Pay attention to your internal senses, naming one or more sensations you have, such as heart rate, changes in breathing, dizziness, sweaty palms, butterflies in stomach.
2. Identify what you feel emotionally– e.g. I am afraid
3. State clearly to yourself that these symptoms are in reaction to a memory. You might give the flashback a title if you want, but make sure the title is no more than three words: “I am having these symptoms because I am remembering The Assault”.
4. Shift attention to your external senses and name at least three things you can see, hear smell.
5. Affirm today's date, including the year, month, and day.
6. Based on the information from the last two steps, evaluate if the situation you are in now is safe or dangerous.
7. If you are actually safe, in spite of having a flashback, you can tell yourself “I am having a flashback and I am not in any danger” or “[the title of the trauma} is not happening now (or anymore)”.
8. If you are not in safe circumstances, seek safety.

(Rothschild, p.71, 2010)



## Example of flashback protocol put together

Here is an example of a protocol put all together. Remember, your statement may be quite different. Just be sure to include the main parts.

“I am really scared and my heart is racing and I am shivering cold, because I am remembering the attack when I was 10. At the same time I am looking around my living room and I can see my green couch, my flat-screen television, and my husband’s shoes. I can hear the microwave beeping. By the calendar I can see it is 30 years later. So I know that the attack was a long time ago and not happening now (or again)”.

Your own protocol will be very different to this, but this is how you can see that changing your language and pulling your attention and awareness back to the present moment might help.

This book by Babette Rothschild provides many ideas such as this protocol, it offers different ideas and strategies for helping with trauma recovery.

*8 Keys to Safe Trauma Recovery*, by Babette Rothschild, 2010.





## Making a protocol card

You can make a card which prompts and reminds you of how to manage your flashbacks or anxiety feeling. These are the main points to remember, you can write these out on a card or store prompts on your phone. You could combine creating a sensory touch on a piece of card such as a soothing piece of fabric or a smell sprayed onto a card.

- 1.Attention
- 2.Identify
- 3.State clearly
- 4.Shift attention
- 5.Affirm the present date
- 6.Assess safety now

## TACTILE SENSORY CARDS





## Recap

- Correct your language, calm your mind and brain down by correcting language and placing the flashback you are having as a memory.
- Bring your attention to what is around you, observe and check out your environment.
- Be careful with assessing what is happening on your internal feelings (e.g. butterflies in tummy, sweaty hands, increased heart rate) try to bring your attention to the present moment.
- Use a reminder card, tools/strategies/skills to ground you to the present time and date.





Notes:



Notes:

**Never suffer in silence, please contact us...**

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