

• It may be useful to write down the flashback or talk about it to someone you trust. It may be very painful to speak about, or you may be afraid to tell someone in case they don't believe you but talking it over with someone can help with healing. In the event of experiencing a flashback keep a list of people you can contact. You may wish to contact us, our number is **0131 556 9437**.

• Reliving memories can be tiring and emotionally draining. It may take hours or even days until you feel okay. After you have had a flashback take time for yourself and reward yourself for all your hard work. Try to do something that makes you feel good such as making yourself a hot drink or listening to your favourite music.

Remember to be patient: it takes time to heal, and flashbacks are part of your healing. They are a normal response to what you have experienced. You cannot stop them from happening but you can do lots of things to lessen the control and effect that they have on your life. You have let yourself remember a traumatic experience and that takes a lot of courage and strength.

about us

We are a women only service and provide free and confidential support to women and girls aged 12 and over, who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. We offer phone, face-to-face, group, letter and email support. Our helpline number is **0131 556 9437**. We can offer you a safe and confidential space to talk about your feelings or experiences.

useful contact numbers

Edinburgh Crisis Centre

24-hour helpline for adults who have used mental health services
0808 801 0414

Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline

Freephone helpline open daily: 6pm-12midnight
08088 01 03 02

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

further information

We have a range of free information leaflets and packs for survivors, their supporters and agencies. Please call us on **0131 556 9437** to request copies and we will send them out to you in an unmarked envelope.

Information leaflets and packs available:

- Information about our support service
- Information and support pack for women
- Information for family, friends and partners
- Information about rape and sexual assault
- Information for survivors of childhood sexual abuse
- Information about group support
- Information about self-harm
- Information about panic attacks
- Legal information booklet: reporting to the police and going to court

All our leaflets are available in larger print. If you would like copies please contact us on 0131 556 9437.

We are committed to providing a high quality support service. For this reason, from time to time, our helpline is monitored internally for training purposes.

January 2008



edinburgh women's rape
and sexual abuse centre
support, advice and advocacy for women and girls

information about
flashbacks for survivors

helpline: 0131 556 9437

administration, outreach
& training: 0131 557 6737

minicom: 0131 557 6757

fax: 0131 558 1612

support@ewrasac.org.uk
info@ewrasac.org.uk

c/o P.O. Box 120
Brunswick Road
Edinburgh, EH7 5WX

Registered Charity Ref. SC 006208.

Registered as a limited company by guarantee No. 297142.
Registered Company Address: Edinburgh Women's Rape
and Sexual Abuse Centre, c/o Quartermile One, 15 Lauriston
Place, Edinburgh, EH3 9EP

about flashbacks

Anyone who has experienced sexual violence, or any other traumatic event can experience flashbacks. They can be confusing, overwhelming and terrifying.

What is a flashback?

A flashback is a memory of a frightening or painful experience which occurred either in childhood or adulthood. It tends not to be like an ordinary memory, but more a sudden and unexpected intrusion.

During a flashback you may feel like you are “reliving” the events. It can feel almost as real as when it originally happened and can also be as frightening. You may feel trapped and powerless.

How long does a flashback last?

A flashback can last from a few seconds to a few hours.

When do flashbacks occur?

Flashbacks can happen at any time, anywhere and often occur without warning. They can happen regardless of how you are feeling – whether you’re feeling low, tired, anxious, happy, calm or relaxed. They can also happen in dreams, known as a ‘night-terror’.

Flashbacks can be triggered by anything that reminds you of what you experienced. Often a trigger can be someone who resembles your abuser. For example, it could be a person’s appearance, smell, voice, or mannerisms. Flashbacks can also be triggered by the time of year, music, a TV programme, colours, tastes or smells.

Do flashbacks take different forms?

Flashbacks can occur in many forms which include visual, auditory or sensory.

Visual flashbacks of your experience can be like watching a single slide from a slide show, a snapshot or photograph that flashes repeatedly like a video clip. Not everyone’s flashbacks are visual.

Auditory flashbacks take the form of words, phrases or sounds that were associated with your experience. These sounds may either be in your head or voices around you.

Sometimes a flashback can occur in response to hearing voices that tell you to do things, such as harm yourself or someone else. Hearing voices can be very frightening.

Sensory flashbacks can be accompanied by intense feelings, such as shame, anger, physical sensations including numbness or feeling like you are being touched when no one is there. These are known as “body memories” which may have been felt at the time of your experience. Sensory flashbacks can also strongly affect your sense of smell and taste.

Will they ever stop?

Flashbacks can be frightening as your mind is remembering feelings, sounds and images which were too traumatic to cope with at the time they occurred. However, flashbacks are also a healthy sign that you are now ready to move on from the trauma you experienced.

Flashbacks are part of the healing process and through time they should decrease in frequency and intensity as enough memories of your experience return. This will allow you to move forwards along the path to healing. If you are able to understand why flashbacks occur they may not be so frightening.

Some ideas on what you can do

Many survivors develop their own individual ways for coping when they experience a flashback:

- **Tell yourself you are having a flashback** and that this is a temporary and normal reaction to what you experienced.
- **Ground yourself in the present** – take a look around and note what is happening - what can you see and hear? Some women keep an elastic band around their wrist and “ping it” to try and bring them back to the here and now. Or, you may find it reassuring or grounding to carry a pebble, a hankie or key-ring in your pocket that you can hold or rub when a flashback occurs.
- During the flashback try to let part of yourself stay in the present, whilst allowing yourself to remember the past. Take long deep breathes, focus on your breathing as the memory emerges. As much as you are able to, don’t fight the flashback – this may be very difficult. If you try to distract yourself or ignore the memories, they may become stronger as they struggle to emerge.
- If you start experiencing a flashback whilst having sex with your partner, you can stop and take time to relax if you need to. It’s OK to take time out from the sexual side of your relationship to work through these memories. Your partner should respect your choice and support you.
- If the flashback occurs whilst you are out and about, try to get yourself to somewhere that you feel is safe. If you cannot go to a safe place try to concentrate on your breathing. Remind yourself that you have survived this experience and that you are not being hurt in the here and now.