

Flashbacks

This leaflet includes:

- What are flashbacks – how they are different from normal memories
- Triggers to flashbacks
- Ways to manage flashbacks

What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are a type of re-experiencing of the event. They are usually intense vivid experiences which often feel like the trauma is happening again right now in this moment. This can include intense feelings such as panic, rage, fear, shame and guilt. Flashbacks can also include intense physical sensations such as pain or someone touching you. You can also see hear or smell things that others around you might not. It can cause you to momentarily lose touch with the present moment and re-live past events.

What is important to remember is that flashbacks are natural responses to trauma and are your brains attempt to process what's happened and to keep you safe.

Flashbacks are different from normal memories which whilst they can be recalled sometimes in lots of detail and indeed may trigger some feelings linked to the memory being thought about, it is not so intense and doesn't have the quality of it feeling like its happening all over again. Recalled memories often feel under more control and whilst we can pull them from our memories this is under our control. They don't just pop into our minds at the slightest or even seemingly without a reminder or trigger.

This is because traumatic events are processed differently in the brain to our everyday memories. In normal situations, a part of our brain called the hippocampus 'tags' or labels our memories with information about where and when they occurred. Unfortunately when our 'threat system' is active during a traumatic event, the hippocampus doesn't always tag the memories in this way, and so when we think about them it may feel as if the events are actually happening now.

Trauma memories are also stored differently to every day memories. They are fragmented and may pop back into our minds unexpectedly and outside our control and so our brains have learned to make us very alert again if we come across any reminders of that danger. We call these reminders **triggers**.

Triggers for flashbacks

Flashbacks can be triggered when we are reminded of the trauma in some way.



Triggers could be things such as images, thoughts, TV programmes, tastes, smells, sounds, or emotions of what happened.

As explained in the trauma and the brain section, our brains have developed a 'better safe than sorry' rule which means that it responds very quickly and automatically to anything that might be a threat. Sometimes after a trauma the amygdala (the alarm system) becomes overly sensitive to threat and is easily triggered much like an overactive smoke alarm. In addition, trauma memories are often not coded and filed away properly in our hippocampus, meaning that memories don't have appropriate time and context information and so float around being easily triggered and feeling fragmented or broken into parts in our brains forming distressing easily triggered reminders in the form of flashbacks.

It can be helpful to work out what your triggers are, so you can make more sense of why you are having a flashback at a particular time or in a particular situation.

To help identify triggers think about situations or feelings to experience before the flash backs occurs

Write or record these in a diary or even the notes in your phone

Notice any patterns – places, times of day, smells, sounds.

Keep notes of what helps in those situations

Try some of our ground exercises – calm breathing, 5 senses.

Seek support from others

Develop a self care plan – include things that help maintain your wellbeing, ways to help you manage a flashback to help you increase your confidence – practice these when you're not experiencing a flashback so you're well practiced at times of need.

However, sometimes people have flashbacks when there is no obvious trigger. You do not need to be able to identify all your triggers in order to deal with flashbacks.

