

## SURVIVORS AND FLASHBACKS

### What are flashbacks?

Anyone who has experienced sexual abuse, rape or any other traumatic event can experience flashbacks. Flashbacks are a memory of a frightening or painful experience, which occurred either in childhood or adult life. It tends not to be like an ordinary memory, but more a sudden and unexpected intrusion. Flashbacks can be experienced as a single slide from a slide show, a snapshot or photograph that flashes repeatedly or like a video clip. A flashback can feel almost as real as when it originally happened and can also be as frightening. Not everyone's flashbacks are visual. Some take the form of words and phrases or sounds that were heard in the past. They can be accompanied by intense feelings, e.g. shame, sadness, anger, or physical sensations known as 'body memories', which may have been felt at the time of the original abuse. Flashbacks can happen at any time, anywhere and often occur without warning. They can be triggered by, the time of year or day, TV programmes, films, smells, words, phrases, songs, places, someone who reminds you in some way of your abuser, pictures, tastes, a particular feeling such as fear or anxiety, having sex or being intimate with your partner. These can occur instantly or sometime later. Sometimes a flashback can occur in response to hearing voices that tell you to do things, e.g. harm yourself or someone else. Hearing voices can be very frightening.

### Ideas on how to cope

Let yourself know that what you are experiencing is a flashback and that this is a normal reaction to the abuse you experienced. It may be useful to look around you and take note of what is happening in the here and now. You may find it reassuring or grounding to carry a stone or something familiar and comforting in your pocket that you can stroke, hold or rub when a flashback occurs. Some women keep an elastic band around their wrist and 'ping it' to try and bring them back to the here and now. Try to breathe from your diaphragm (put your hand just above your navel and breathe so your hand is pushed up and down). This can help prevent a panic attack. If the flashback occurs whilst you are out and about try to get yourself to somewhere that you feel safe and secure. If you are wakened by a flashback, also known as a 'night terror', try to write it down, then go and

have something warm to drink, watch some TV, listen to music or do something else that you find relaxing. It's often best not to try and sleep until you have been able to relax for a while. Keep a list of people you can contact in the event of experiencing a flashback.

It may be useful to write the flashback down or tell it to someone you trust - though it can be very painful to speak about, talking it over with someone can help your healing. If you self-harm/injure in response to a flashback, try to take some precautions to minimise the longer term harm that you might do to yourself (see the section on Survivors and Self-Harm/Injury). It may be useful to try and identify if there is anything in particular that triggers your flashbacks. It may be useful in the short-term to avoid your triggers, although you can't always control when they occur. If you start experiencing a flashback while having sex with your partner you can stop and take time to relax. It's OK to take time out from the sexual side of your relationship to work through these memories if you need to. Your partner should respect your choice and support you. Do something that helps you relax, e.g. have a bath, listen to your favourite music after you have had a flashback.

Remember flashbacks are a normal response to what you have experienced.

## HELPLINE SUPPORT

You can telephone our helpline for support or information on 01738 630965. We also have a 24 hour answering machine, so that at any other time messages can be left and will be returned discreetly, as soon as possible.

Write to: WRASAC P & K, P.O. Box 7570, Perth, PH2 1BY

Email [info@perthshirerapecrisis.org](mailto:info@perthshirerapecrisis.org)

## USEFUL CONTACTS

Samaritans	(01738) 626 666
Genito-Urinary Clinic	(01738) 473 220
Police Family Protection Unit	(01738) 892 911

Perthshire Women's Aid	(01738) 639 043
Victim Support	(01738) 567 171
Criminal Injuries Compensation Board	(0141) 331 2726
Citizens Advice Bureau	(01738) 624 301
Bristol Crisis Service for Women	(0117) 925 1119
Childline	(0800 1111)