

**RASA**  
Merseyside

Sexual  
Violence  
Services

Information  
for survivors of  
sexual violence

# Flashbacks



Data and content supplied  
by Rape Crisis Scotland

# Flashbacks

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## What are flashbacks?

- » A flashback is when you re-experience a frightening or painful event from the past. It tends not to be like an ordinary memory, but more a sudden and unexpected intrusion
- » Flashbacks can last from a few seconds to a few hours
- » They can happen at any time and anywhere, often without warning. They can happen whether you are feeling low, tired, anxious, happy or relaxed. You can have flashbacks in dreams ('night-terrors')
- » They can be triggered by anything that reminds you of what you experienced. This might be someone who resembles the person who abused you in appearance, smell, voice or mannerisms. It could be the time of year, music, a TV programme, colours, tastes or smells
- » Flashbacks happen because, after something traumatic like sexual violence, it is natural for the brain to replay events to process or reach some understanding of the attack. During a flashback, you may feel that it is really happening to you now. This is very frightening
- » How you experience flashbacks is individual to you and what has happened. They are your mind trying to make sense of what happened

- » It is very distressing to relive your experience in this way. But by remembering, your mind is trying to find ways of moving on. It does not feel like it, but flashbacks are part of the healing process
- » Over time they should decrease in frequency and intensity
- » If you are able to understand why flashbacks happen, they may not be so frightening

## How do flashbacks affect survivors of sexual violence?

- » There are different sorts of flashbacks: which you can see (visual), hear (auditory) and/or feel (sensory). Flashbacks can make you feel as if you are reliving the attack
- » Visual flashbacks can be like watching a single slide from a slide show, a snapshot or video that flashes repeatedly
- » Auditory flashbacks take the form of words, phrases or sounds linked with your experience. These sounds may 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
- » Sensory flashbacks can involve intense feelings, such as shame or anger, or physical sensations including feeling numb or like you are being touched when no-one is there. These 'body memories' may be what you felt at the time of your experience. Sensory flashbacks can strongly affect your sense of smell and taste

- » Flashbacks can make survivors feel anxious, frightened and out of control. Survivors may become quite isolated as they might not want to go out or go anywhere, do anything or see anyone which might remind them of what happened

If this is happening to you, it is a natural response to your experience of sexual violence.

There are things you can do to manage flashbacks and reduce the anxiety, stress and other issues they can cause.

## What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

Survivors have found the following helpful for managing flashbacks:

- » Tell yourself you are having a flashback. You are not losing control or going mad. Flashbacks are a temporary and natural reaction to surviving trauma
- » ‘Ground’ yourself in NOW. Take a look around and note what is happening. What can you see and hear? Tell yourself your name and the date and time. You could keep an elastic band on your wrist and ‘ping it’ to bring yourself back to the here and now. Or, you could carry a pebble, a hankie or key-ring in your pocket which you can hold or rub when you have a flashback
- » During the flashback, let part of yourself stay in the present, whilst allowing yourself to remember the past. Take long deep breaths, and focus on your breathing as the memory emerges. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe

- » If you can, try not to fight the flashback. This may be very difficult. But if you try to distract yourself or ignore the memories, they may become stronger as they try to emerge
- » If you are able to speak with your partner (if you have one) about your experience of sexual violence, you may be able to explain to them about flashbacks and agree in advance what you wish to happen if a flashback happens during intimacy. If you experience a flashback during sex, your partner may be able to help ground you, saying your name and letting you know you are safe. It is 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 you are unable to disclose your experience of sexual violence to your partner, perhaps it would still be possible to talk about what you are or are not comfortable with sexually
- » If you have a flashback when you are out and about, try to get yourself to somewhere that you feel safe. If you cannot go to a safe place try to focus on your breathing: taking long slow breaths will help. Remind yourself that you are not being hurt now; that it is in the past
- » It may help to write down or talk about the flashback to someone you trust. Keep a list of people you can contact. You can contact the RCS Helpline which is open daily between 6pm and midnight
- » It may help, in the short-term, to avoid things which you know can trigger your flashbacks (although you cannot control when they occur). But be careful about this as it can lead to you limiting yourself. This can get in the way of living the life you want and deserve. With support, many survivors find that they are able to predict flashbacks and their effect. Often, talking

about the flashbacks, and more generally about your experience of sexual violence, can help. Although you can never make it so it did not happen, it is possible to heal from sexual violence

- » Flashbacks can be very tiring. It may take hours or even days before you feel OK again. After a flashback, take time for yourself. Try to do something that makes you feel good such as having a relaxing bath or listening to your favourite music

**Remember: you are important. Your feelings matter. You do not have to cope on your own.**

## Help and information

**There are many people who want to help. You can phone/email the RCS Helpline for support and information. We can tell you about services in your area. You do not need to give your name. RCS Helpline (6pm to midnight every day) on 08088 01 03 02 or email anytime on [support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](mailto:support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)**

If you are feeling overwhelmed and you think this is having a serious effect on your health, speak to your GP or another professional. They may be able to refer you for talking or other therapies which can help you manage better.

The information in this leaflet draws on various sources including those below. **You can find more information online at:**

- » [www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)
- » Information after rape and sexual assault:  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0)
- » [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)
- » [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp)
- » [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- » [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk)

App: eCBT Trauma

**A useful book is:** *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Laura Davis, 1990. Published by: HarperCollins in paperback.

## Local rape crisis centres

Rape Crisis Centres are located in all local authorities in Scotland; for the most up to date contact information and referral criteria please go to: [www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/about-local-rapecrisis-centres/](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/about-local-rapecrisis-centres/)

### **Aberdeen**

Rape Crisis Grampian

### **Argyll & Bute**

Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis Centre

### **Dumfries & Galloway**

Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Support Centre

### **Dundee**

Women's Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre

### **East Ayrshire**

The STAR Centre

### **Edinburgh**

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

### **Fife**

Fife Rape & Sexual Assault Centre

### **Forth Valley**

Forth Valley Rape Crisis

### **Glasgow & Clyde**

Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis Centre

### **Lanarkshire**

Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre

### **Moray**

Moray Rape Crisis

### **Orkney**

Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service

### **Perth**

Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre Perth & Kinross

### **Highland**

Rape & Sexual Abuse Service Highland

### **Scottish Borders**

Scottish Borders Rape Crisis Centre

### **Shetland**

Shetland Rape Crisis

### **Western Isles**

Western Isles Rape Crisis Centre





**Helpline 0151 666 1392**  
**[helpline@rasamerseyside.org](mailto:helpline@rasamerseyside.org)**

**Helpline Times:**

Tuesday - 6-8pm

Thursday 6-8pm

Friday 12-2pm

**Information & Referral Line Contact Numbers:**

Liverpool/Sefton 0151 558 1801

Wirral 0151 650 0155