

# Coping with Flashbacks

## Objective

To reduce the discomfort associated with flashbacks.

## What to Know

A flashback occurs when memories of a past trauma feel as if they are taking place in the present moment. During a flashback it can be challenging to connect with reality. Flashbacks may seem random, but they can be triggered by ordinary experiences connected with the senses (for example, someone’s tone of voice, a specific scent, or a loud noise). They are a normal response to trauma, and there are steps you can take to cope. This worksheet will help you create a coping plan for when you have flashbacks.

**1. Ground.** The first step is to get grounded—your other coping skills will not be as effective if you are not oriented to the present day, your body, and sense of self. As you ground, the intensity of the flashback will diminish, allowing you to use other skills to cope.

Here are some ways to ground.

- Open your eyes, pay attention, look around, and listen. Label five things you can see, five things of a single color, five things of one shape. Notice what you hear. Is it nearby or far away? Loud or soft? Pleasant or annoying?
- Place your feet firmly on the floor. Become rooted to the space you are in.
- Sit upright and remind yourself of the date, your age, where you are, and that you are safe.
- Wiggle your toes and fingertips. Slowly work up your body until you regain control.
- Inhale strong aromas like coffee, candles, citrus fruit, or scented lotion.
- Chew gum or eat a meal or snack. Drink a cold or hot beverage.
- Run your fingers over unique textures, like a zipper, pet’s fur, stone, or fidget item.

What else grounds you?

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What will you do to ground when you experience a flashback?

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**2. Engage in self-talk.** Tell yourself you are having a flashback and remind yourself the actual event is over, and you are safe. Self-talk can be part of grounding or used to keep you calm and steady while you use other techniques. Say things like:

“This is just a flashback—it’s not real. This isn’t happening right now.”

“I’m safe now. No one is harming me. There’s no threat to my safety in this moment.”

“This won’t last forever. I have the power to make my symptoms go away.”

“I’m competent, capable, and I’ve done this before.”

“It’s important that I get grounded. I can do this.”

“I can ask for help.”

“This is temporary, and I can feel it getting easier already. I’ll be okay.”

“I’m in control. I get to decide when and how this ends. I have the power now.”

You may choose a mantra or phrase that feels right to you, something you will remember when you need it. What might you say to yourself?

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**3. Separate the past from the present.** This is a tool loved ones can help you with. During a flashback, it can be easy to get disoriented. You may feel like you are a young child, or in a completely different environment. Label all the things that are different now from the past event you are reliving. Do this in your mind, out loud, in writing, or some other creative way. Here are some examples:

*[look at your body]* “These are adult hands and feet. I can drive, I’m taller now, and I’m xx years old.” Observe physical changes like tattoos, wrinkles, and so on.

“There were no smartphones back then, and I didn’t have a laptop like this.” Notice other things that did not exist at the time of the event.

“I have a voice and I’m not a helpless child. Before I would have been too scared to say anything.” *[use your voice to prove it is safe to do so]*

Label any other life changes since the trauma: geographic locations, profession, people you know now, people that have died, pets you now have, and so on. List popular music, movies, and sources of entertainment you enjoy now.

Write down all the things that are different now from the memory you are reliving.

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**4. Use internal communication.** Sometimes it can be helpful to ask yourself a series of questions. Opening a line of communication during a flashback can allow you to calm yourself. Use a journal or notebook and ask yourself the following questions.

“Is there a reason I'm experiencing this flashback right now?”

“Why am I reliving these images/feelings/physical pain?”

“Is someone else in this flashback coming to mind for a reason?”

“Is there a reason I feel unsafe?”

“Is there a reason I'm scared?”

“What triggered this flashback? Did I see/hear/feel/smell something familiar?”

“Am I ignoring self-care?”

“Am I oriented to the present? I know it's 20\_\_\_\_, so how can I get grounded?”

“What can I do to feel safe in this moment?”

“Am I punishing myself for something?”

Write down some other questions you might ask yourself.

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Answers may come to you the moment you ask these questions.

**5. Breathe.** Take slow, deep breaths while placing your hand on your stomach. You should see your hand move out with the inhalations, and watch it fall in with the exhalations. Deep breathing increases the oxygen in your body and helps you move out of anxious states faster.

**6. Recognize what makes you feel safe.** Wrap yourself in a blanket, call a friend, take a soothing bath, or spend time alone in a room by yourself. Do what you need to do to feel secure.

What make you feel safe?

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You may be able to prevent future flashbacks by identifying warning signs and triggers.

**Pay attention to warning signs.** Flashbacks sometimes feel as though they come out of nowhere, but there are often early warning signs, like feeling pressure in your chest or becoming lightheaded. Become aware of the early signs of flashbacks to help you manage or prevent them.

What are some of your early physical or emotional warning signs?

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**Identify the triggers.** Flashbacks can be triggered by a sensation, emotion, a reminder of the event, or even an unrelated stressful experience.

What triggers your flashbacks?

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Make a plan for how to avoid these triggers or how to cope if you encounter a trigger.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you cope with flashbacks? Why or why not?

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What was the main obstacle you encountered practicing this exercise?

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If you are still struggling with flashbacks, whom can you talk with? Describe what you will say.

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What else can you do to cope with flashbacks?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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