

Flashbacks & Grounding Techniques



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE

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Flashbacks are intense memories of past traumatic experiences that are accompanied by strong emotions. They may take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, bodily sensations, feelings, or the lack of feeling (numbness). While most people think of flashbacks as being visual memories, like they're seeing their memory unfold in front of them in real time, often they solely consist of a sense of panic, of being trapped, or a feeling of powerlessness with no memory attached to these feelings.

Because experiencing sexual assault is physically and emotionally overwhelming, it is common for a

person to detach from the experience as it occurs. Although it has been temporarily pushed aside, the intensity of their experience will often resurface in the form of flashbacks, and feelings just as intense in the present as they were during the crisis—almost as if it were happening today. The intense feelings and bodily sensations are not related to the reality of the present moment, and often seem to come out of nowhere. For this reason, the individual experiencing the flashback may begin to think they are “going crazy” because they feel out of control, panicked, and scared, seemingly out of nowhere.

Triggers

A trigger is anything that sets off a flashback. Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people. A person's triggers can be activated through one or more of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. It is very common to be triggered by external cues that were present during their assault—things like seeing someone who looks like the person who harmed them, or being in the location where the assault took place.

That said, triggers are not limited to specific cues that were available during the assault. They can also be

things such as the time of year that the assault took place. For example, if the assault took place when the person first came to University, the change of season to fall could act as a trigger.

It is also common for folks to feel triggered when they are going through times of stress. While this stress may not be related to the assault in any way, just an overall increase in their feelings of stress could trigger flashbacks about the sexual assault.

Flashbacks are Normal

Triggers and flashbacks are common to survivors of any kind of trauma. They are particularly common among people who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is the normal (and common) reaction to events that are beyond our normal realm of experience (such as sexual assault, war, or natural disaster), and it consists of suffering from nightmares,

flashbacks, gaps in memory, and a sense of a lack of connection to others. While not every individual who experiences flashbacks will experience PTSD, it is very common for those who experience sexual assault to experience PTSD at some point after the sexual assault.

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Coping with Flashbacks

There are many different ways to cope with flashbacks. As everyone is unique, different techniques will work for different people. An umbrella term for the different techniques that can be used to cope with flashbacks is 'Grounding'. Grounding techniques help us to temporarily put aside strong emotions until we have the resources (time, safety, space, supportive person, etc.) to deal with them. Grounding helps us connect with the present moment, as strong emotions or difficult memories can sweep us away or impact our nervous systems. Sometimes we need to get in touch with feelings, but sometimes we need to be able to

create healthy distance from them. Grounding is not relaxation. Grounding strategies are active and focused to help create space from overwhelming emotions or urges.

The U of A Sexual Assault Centre can work with you to identify the grounding techniques that work best for you. It is important to remember that grounding can take practice—sometimes it will take some time to get to a point where the grounding technique becomes very effective for you.

Grounding Techniques

There are generally three categories of grounding techniques: physical, mental, and soothing.

Physical Grounding: using the five senses to connect to the present moment

Examples of Physical Grounding Techniques

- Clench and release fists
- Stomp or push your feet into ground or sit on the ground
- Run cold water over your hands, forearms, face and back of neck
- Drink cold water
- Grip the chair you are sitting in
- Taste something and slowly described the flavours and sensations as you eat it
- Move about, stretch, shake out your hands, shake out your legs, jump up and down
- Touch objects around you and notice their texture, pliability, weight and features

- Walk slowly, rolling through your feet, counting your steps or saying "left" and "right" as you step
- Focus on breathing
- Keep an object you can hold onto such as a stone, a ring, a piece of cloth, etc.
- Notice the points your body is connected to objects in the world around you—the ground, chair, bed, etc.

Mental Grounding: using imagery or cognitive strategies to help calm us

Examples of Mental Grounding Techniques

- Read and speak the words out loud in slow motion. Try reading words backwards
- Container visualisation
- Look around you and choose an object to describe in as much detail as possible, using all the 5 senses (touch, texture, weight, smell, temperature, etc)

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- Describe in great detail a routine activity: how you prepare a certain meal, start a vehicle, go through a morning routine, to a certain sport, etc.
- Remind yourself of your age, your present location, the current date, who and what is around you, what you did today so far, and what is around you that lets you know you are safe
- Counting objects in the room that are of a certain shape or colour (i.e. counting all purple or orange things, counting all circle shaped things, etc)

Soothing Grounding: using images or things that calm and comfort us

- Think of, or go to, a space that feels comforting and soothing to you—really see, hear, smell and feel aspects of that space or place
- Recall favorite things (people, places, seasons, shows or episodes, animal, etc)

- Use coping, self-supportive or kind statements ("You are safe", "this won't last forever", "you've gotten through this before")
- Create a list of short term and long term things you are looking forward to doing
- Visualize or look at photographs of people you care about
- Plan out a safe treat (soothing bath, movie out, piece of dessert or candy, etc)
- Read or remember song lyrics, quotes or prayers that are inspiring, uplifting and grounding

As mentioned previously, grounding is a skill. Like any skill, it needs to be practiced repeatedly at times we may not even need it or at times when we only feel a minor disturbance. This will help us to use grounding skills when we are feeling stronger emotions.

Tips for Learning Grounding Techniques

- Pay attention to what type of grounding and which exercises work best for you. Switch it up as you need to. Create your own that work for you.
- Don't expect fast results. Grounding might need to be practiced for up to 30 min before its effects are felt.
- Keep an index card of your favorite grounding strategies or keep a photo of an index card on your phone.
- Anticipate when and where you may need to use grounding. Have reminders of grounding wherever you may need them—your home, car, travel bag, etc.

- Start grounding early when you feel a negative mood, impulse or urge begin. The earlier you start, the less likely you are to become overwhelmed.
- Teach safe people you trust to help ground you (friends, family, partner(s)).