

13 Steps for Managing Emotional Flashbacks

Focus on the bold print when flashback is active.

1. **Say to yourself: "I am having a flashback"**. Flashbacks take you into a timeless part of the psyche that feels as helpless, hopeless and surrounded by danger as you were in childhood. The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are past memories that cannot hurt you now.
2. **Remind yourself: "I feel afraid but I am not in danger! I am safe now, here in the present."** Remember you are now in the safety of the present, far from the danger of the past.
3. **Own your right/need to have boundaries.** Remind yourself that you do not have to allow anyone to mistreat you; you are free to leave dangerous situations and protest unfair behavior.
4. **Speak reassuringly to the Inner Child.** The child needs to know that you love her/him unconditionally – that s/he can come to you for comfort and protection when s/he feels lost and scared.
5. **Deconstruct eternity thinking.** In childhood, fear and abandonment felt endless a safer future was unimaginable. Remember this flashback will pass as it always has before.
6. **Remind yourself that you are in an adult body** with allies, skills and resources to protect you that you never had as a child. [Feeling small and fragile is a sign of a flashback.]
7. Ease back into your body. Fear launches you into "heady" worrying or numbing and spacing out.
 - a. **Gently ask your body to relax:** feel each of your major muscle groups and softly encourage them to relax. [Tightened muscles send false danger signals to your brain.]
 - b. **Breathe deeply and slowly.** [Holding your breath also signals danger.]
 - c. **Slow down:** rushing presses your brain's flight response button.
 - d. **Find a safe place** to unwind and soothe yourself: wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or a stuffed animal, lie down on your bed or in a closet or in a bath; take a nap.
 - e. **Feel the fear in your body without reacting to it.** Fear is just an energy in your body. It cannot hurt you if you do not run from it.

8. **Resist the Inner Critic's Drasticizing and Catastrophizing**
 - a. **Use thought-stopping** to halt the critic's endless exaggerations of danger, and its constant planning to control the uncontrollable. Refuse to shame, hate or abandon yourself. Channel the anger of self-attack into saying "NO" to your critic's unfair self-criticism.
 - b. **Use Thought-substitution and Thought-correction** to replace negative thinking with a memorized list of your qualities and accomplishments.
9. **Allow yourself to grieve.** Flashbacks are opportunities to release old, unexpressed feelings of fear, hurt, and abandonment. Validate and sooth your child's past experience of helplessness and hopelessness. Healthy grieving can turn our tears into self-compassion and our anger into self-protection.
10. **Cultivate safe relationships and seek support.** Take time alone when you need it, but don't let shame isolate you. Feeling shame doesn't mean you are shameful. Educate your intimates about flashbacks and ask them to help you talk and feel your way through them.
11. **Learn to identify the types of triggers that lead to flashbacks.** Avoid unsafe people, places, activities and triggering mental processes. Practice preventive maintenance with these steps when triggering situations are unavoidable.
12. **Figure out what you are flashing back to.** Flashbacks are opportunities to discover, validate and heal our wounds from past abuse and abandonment. They also point to our still unmet developmental needs and can provide motivation to get them met.
13. **Be patient with a slow recovery process:** it takes time in the present to become un-adrenalized, and considerable time in the future to gradually decrease the intensity, duration and frequency of flashbacks. Real recovery is a gradually progressive process [often two steps forward, one step back], not an attained salvation fantasy. Don't beat yourself up for having a flashback.