

Coping with Flashbacks Handout

The author, Sean Bennick is not a health professional, but has struggled with PTSD and shared the following coping techniques on his website at www.mental-health-matters.com

Try the techniques below when you have distressing memories or flashbacks. Use them as often as you can if they seem to help you cope and are not harmful.

Keep in mind that my explanations about why the techniques below work for me are based on my own understanding and may not be accurate. I can tell you that each of the ideas I suggest have worked for me and helped me cope with my own flashbacks for the past 5 years.

When You Are Alone, Try:

Memory Games

One of the easiest ways to cope or manage a flashback is by using distraction. Try to remember something challenging such as the lyrics to a particular song, or a favorite poem. This can help interrupt the flashback by redirecting the activity in your brain.

For some reason, memory games work well when I am having flashbacks that involve my hearing and balance. Some of the more effective memory games I have used are:

- Humming songs or remembering the lyrics to songs
- Naming facts I learned in school

Ice Cube

This has been my most important tool in dealing with physically oriented flashbacks. The technique was actually taught to me by a Vietnam Veteran who said he used it for every single flashback, adding "usually it helps, but sometimes it can't." I have found it to be effective to some degree almost every time I have tried it.

Simply take a fairly large ice cube and hold it tight in one of your hands throughout the flashback. The cold feeling keeps that part of you grounded to some degree and the physical sensation gives you something solid to focus on besides the memory you are reliving. It is important to hold the ice cube fairly tight and in the same hand for the duration of the flashback. I experimented with

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switching hands and holding it lightly and the technique lost much of its effectiveness.

I always use this technique in addition to some of the others when attempting to Escape or Control.

Wall Spotting

This technique involves selecting 4 or 5 brightly colored items in the room that are easily within vision and moving your focus between them. Make sure to vary the order and allow yourself to lock onto the items briefly before shifting to the next item. Keep this up throughout the flashback and continue for a short time afterwards.

Following the same pattern can actually cause you to become more involved in the flashback because your mind becomes used to the pattern and builds on it. By varying the pattern, you disrupt the thought processes involved in the flashback.

I suggest continuing the eye movements for a while after the flashback ends to allow yourself to get more focused on the present since I use this technique mostly for flashbacks with a visual element.

Cold Water on Your Face

This one is simple and can help with any type of flashback. Use cold enough water to give yourself a good “shock”. This technique relies on the fact that our bodies want to survive.

Sudden immersion in very cold water (below 70 degrees) triggers the “Diving Reflex.” The body reacts by lowering the heart rate, increasing blood pressure, and shutting down circulation to all but the body's core. The result is a lowered metabolism that conserves energy, which helps cold water survival. This is also why near-drowning victims in cold water have a much higher survival rate.

The effect on a flashback is fairly drastic. In short, the brain is shocked and interrupts the flashback to survive what may be a life-threatening immersion in freezing water. For this reason, make sure you use the coldest water available and use a good amount of it.

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When A Friend Is Available

Counting

This is a technique I came up with while assisting a friend with a panic attack. I call this Counting for lack of a better term. The idea, like most of the techniques above, is to confuse the mind and disrupt the thought processes. To do this, remember that random is good.

Basically, your friend would make you repeat whatever they are saying and would start by following a predictable pattern. Throwing in random words breaks the pattern up and causes a brief disruption in the flashback. This can be very powerful against the more intense flashbacks and I tend to use it only when I am in great need.

The sample below is meant to illustrate both why I call it counting and how it can work.

- One
- Two
- Three
- Eight
- Five
- Six
- Seven
- Green
- Forty-seven
- Nine
- Ten
- Eleven
- Cow

I am unsure why this has been effective, but I do know it will not work alone. If you are selecting the order, than the order is not random, there are no surprises. The surprises catch us off guard and our reaction of "One, Two, Three, Eight?" is often enough to lessen the impact of fairly intense flashbacks.

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Avoid Self-injury

- Self-injury is not effective, and causes a dangerous situation. Resorting to causing yourself pain to cover other pain simply makes your agony worse. You may think you feel better, but not for long. Once things return to normal and the flashback is gone, there is additional pain and sometimes serious injury to deal with.
- I view alcohol and drugs in the same way (with the exception of drugs prescribed by my own doctor or therapist). They may not do visible harm like cutting yourself, but the damage is done and the problems are compounded

Dealing with Flashbacks

At the first sign of an oncoming flashback, you need to quickly determine which option you are choosing:

- **Accepting** the flashback at full force may seem like a ridiculous choice, but it may help your mind process the information they contain
- Be with someone in a safe place if you do this
- **Controlling** the flashback means trying to interrupt the thought processes (like electrical impulses in the brain) and replacing them with other thoughts
- **Escaping** may not always be possible, but the techniques used to control the flashbacks may be able to put them off until you are safer
- The techniques used for each of these options are the same, but how you combine these techniques and the intensity with which you use them will vary for each of the three options.
- It is important to note that not all flashbacks can or will be **controlled** or **escaped**. If the triggering event is strong enough, the flashback may overwhelm every attempt made at control or escape. During these times, get yourself to the safest place you can and keep using the techniques to manage the **accepted** flashback.

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