

Learning how to cope

Coping with flashbacks
Coping with panic attacks
Grounding techniques
Releasing anger
One in Four Helpline



One in Four

Support and resources for women and men
who have experience of sexual abuse

Coping with flashbacks

What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are re-emerging memories of past trauma. Several things can trigger one – something seen, heard, tasted or smelled; a sensation from inside the body; or a position, action or intention. Going through a new trauma can also initiate a flashback. A flashback produces a vivid recollection of the past and often includes pain and the feeling of re-experiencing the abuse.

Coping with flashbacks

Tell yourself you are having a flashback and that this is okay and very normal in people who were traumatised as children (or as adults).

Remind yourself that the worst is over – it happened in the past, but it is not happening now. The 'child' inside you who was abused is giving you these memories to use in your healing and, however terrible you feel, you survived the awfulness then, which means you can survive and get through what you are remembering now.

Call on the 'adult' part of yourself to tell your 'child' that they are not alone, not in any danger now and that you

will help them to get through this. Let your 'child' self know it's OK to remember and to feel what they feel and that this will help them in healing from what had happened to them. However hard it is for you, your 'child' is communicating in the only way he or she can.

Imagine that the images that you see are on a TV screen. Turn the sound down, turn it up again, then turn the TV off so that the images fade away. Remember that you can choose whether to remember and re-feel.

Try some of these ways of 'grounding' yourself and becoming more aware of the present:

- **stamp your feet – grind them on the floor to remind yourself where you are now;**
- **look around the room – notice the colours, the people, the shapes of things;**
- **listen to the sounds around you – the traffic, voices, the washing machine, etc;**
- **feel your body – the boundary of your skin, your clothes, the chair or floor supporting you; or**
- **have an elastic band to hand (or on your wrist) – when you 'ping'**

it against your wrist and feel it on your skin, that feeling is in the now, the things you are re-experiencing were in the past.

Take care of your breathing – breathe deeply down to your diaphragm, put your hand there just above your navel and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down. You can also count to five as you breathe out and in. When we get scared we breathe too quickly and shallowly and our body begins to panic because we're not getting enough oxygen. This causes dizziness, shakiness and more panic. Breathing slowly and deeply will stop this.

If you have lost a sense of where you end and the rest of the world begins, rub your body so you can feel its edges, the boundary of you. Wrap yourself in a blanket, feel it around you.

Get support if you would like it. Let people close to you know about flashbacks so they can help if you

want them to. That might mean holding you, talking to you – helping you to reconnect with the present to remember you are safe and cared for now.

Flashbacks are powerful experiences, which drain your energy. Take time to look after yourself when you have had a flashback. You could have a warm, relaxing bath or a sleep, a warm drink, play some soothing music or just take some quiet time for yourself. Your 'child', and you deserve being taken care of, given all you went through in the past.

When you feel ready, write down all you remember about the flashback and how you got through it. This will help you to remember information for your healing and to remind you that you did get through it and can again.

Remember you are not crazy – flashbacks are normal and you are healing.

●● Get support if you would like it. Let people close to you know about flashbacks so they can help if you want them to. That might mean holding you, talking to you – helping you to reconnect with the present to remember you are safe and cared for now. ●●

Coping with panic attacks

What are panic attacks?

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense anxiety. Sometimes attacks are triggered by something specific that frightens us. However, we can panic spontaneously for no apparent reason. This can be very upsetting and frightening.

There are various symptoms that may be experienced during a panic attack:

- shortness of breath and difficulty in breathing;
- palpitations or a sensation of the heart beating faster than usual;
- a sense of feeling ‘unreal’;
- pains or tightness in the chest;
- unsteadiness, trembling or dizziness;
- excess sweating;
- feeling faint;
- a fear of dying or losing control;
- tingling in the hands and feet; or
- choking or a feeling of being smothered.

Panic attacks are a common symptom of anxiety and one in ten people in Britain suffer a panic attack every day. It is more common in women than men. There are many reasons why we may experience panic attacks – often we may have had a period of prolonged stress but haven’t recognised its cumulative effect.

It may help to talk to friends or a counsellor to identify areas in your life that may be upsetting you, and take the opportunity to express your feelings and discover new ways of coping with stressful situations.

How you can help yourself

Learn relaxation techniques

Being relaxed makes it more difficult to panic, because tension is part of an attack.

Control your diet Alcohol and caffeine may make you more prone to anxiety.

Learn how to breathe properly

Breathing techniques can help to prevent hyperventilation.

●● Think positive thoughts – tell yourself that you’re not going to die, that the attack is harmless and it will soon pass. ●●

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Take regular exercise This reduces anxiety and helps to rid the body of the stress hormone adrenaline.

Learn distraction techniques They can take your mind off the panic and any symptoms during the attack.

What to do if you're having an attack

If you are having an attack:

- stop, take a break and try to think about what it is that's making you panic;
- sit down somewhere comfortable, away from too many other people if possible;
- think positive thoughts – tell yourself that you're not going to die, that the attack is harmless and it will soon pass; and
- keep reminding yourself that you'll be fine.

If you're hyperventilating practice your breathing techniques. If you haven't learnt any yet, breathe very

slowly and steadily by counting along with each of the breaths. Try to hold each breath for three counts.

The old paper bag technique might be useful. Take a paper bag and hold it over your nose and mouth tightly with cupped hands. This helps you to inhale your own carbon dioxide and slows your breathing.

Instead of trying to run away from the scene, tell yourself that you'll stay for one or two minutes. When that time is up try to promise to stay for another couple of minutes. If it proves to be too much, don't be afraid to leave the area.

●● Sometimes attacks are triggered by something specific that frightens us. However, we can panic spontaneously for no apparent reason. ●●

Grounding techniques

What is grounding?

When someone is having a flashback, panic attack, or dissociative episode, or is feeling particularly anxious, it can help to try to reconnect through the five senses with the present time and place.

This is reassuring because people having these experiences will often feel as if they are stuck in childhood, or outside of their body, or unable to move or breathe.

Reconnecting with the body and its location in space and time lets them know that they are actually safe and that there is no threat to their well-being.

Some grounding techniques

Look around the room, naming out loud each object that you see. The experience of using and hearing your voice as it speaks the words for what is in the room with you will remind you that you are present in the room and connected with it through your awareness of what is around you.

To increase your sense of connection with the physical world, touch or hold something very cold or hot (be careful) like a frozen orange or a cup of tea.

Speak out loud (or write in a note to yourself) **“the date is (today’s date) and I am (your age), years-old, living in my own home with (names of family members, partner, and/or pets)”**. This will help you remember that you are not in the traumatic situation from your past, and that you are safe now that it is over.

If you are sitting down, get up and go into another room. This is especially useful if you are feeling paralysed by anxiety or if you have lost track of your external surroundings. Stepping outside for a minute can also be helpful.

Repeat a soothing phrase – such as **“I am safe and in control”** – until you feel calmer.

Talk to someone who knows what you are experiencing and can help dissolve your anxiety by speaking to you, reminding you of your present time and location, or holding your hand if that is helpful. Try to make eye contact with them.

Do some light exercise like sit-ups if you feel disconnected from your body. You can also go for a walk outside to help reorient you in your physical surroundings. Just don't get lost!

Eat or drink something with a strong taste or texture that you enjoy, such as strong coffee or tea, or a crunchy apple. Notice how it feels as you chew or sip it and as it travels down to your stomach.

Put on some lively music if you are dissociated, or something soothing if you are anxious. Make sure its something that doesn't remind you of anything unpleasant.

If the room is dimly lit, walk around and turn on all the lights. This is especially helpful if you get frightened at night.

Read out aloud to yourself from a familiar book, or look at a favourite painting or poster and describe what you see.

If you have been inside by yourself for a while and it is safe for you to walk or drive, go out to a coffee shop or shopping where there are people around. Notice the ordinary things they are doing and how none of them are threatening you. If you go to have coffee, try to make eye-contact with the person at the counter.

Try to reconnect with your body and the physical world by briskly rubbing your arms or legs, or by shuffling your feet on the ground.

●● People having these experiences will often feel as if they are stuck in childhood, or outside of their body, or unable to move or breathe. Reconnecting with the body and its location in space and time lets them know that they are actually safe and that there is no threat to their well-being. ●●

Releasing anger

Pillow or cushion punching

Use fists, open hands or an object – such as a baseball bat – on soft furnishings.

This helps let go of past hurts and emotional pain, releasing anger from the ‘child’ and ‘adult’ in you.

Empty chair

Imagine your abuser in an empty chair. Stand and walk around the empty chair, looking at your abuser and confronting them – and then let your anger out verbally.

Letter writing

Letter writing is for your eyes only or for sharing with a safe therapist – do not post any letters you write.

Use pen and paper and write a letter to your abuser. Be direct in the letter – describe how you feel about what was done to you and be specific about what happened.

Use whatever expressive words of anger, hurt or confusion come up for you and do not worry about your spelling or how you construct your sentences. This is just about releasing words onto paper, getting stuff out of your mind and dealing with the anger that you feel.

Try writing letters from both your ‘child’ feelings and your ‘adult’ feelings. The ‘child’ needs to express anger until they feel more powerful than the abuser, and the ‘adult’ needs to express anger on behalf of the ‘child’.

Notice how you feel at the end of writing the letter. Continue writing the letters until your anger is lessened or gone.

Other releases

Other physical or emotional releases include:

- jogging;
- cleaning;
- riding a bike;
- smashing old crockery;
- throwing bottles into a bottle bank;
- tearing paper;
- screaming into a pillow; or even
- dancing an angry dance.

The important thing is to find a method of release that works for you and helps you deal with your anger – no matter how strange it may seem to someone else.

Remember, what we are usually afraid of is someone's behaviour when they are angry – not the emotion itself.

●● Acknowledging anger is the first step to getting rid of it; denying anger is a sure way of keeping it. ●●

Penny Parks, *Rescuing the 'Inner Child': Therapy for Adults Sexually Abused as Children* (1994)

The One in Four Helpline

The **One in Four** Helpline is a national helpline run by trained helpline staff to support you when you feel you need someone to speak to right now.

Sometimes when you are a survivor of childhood sexual abuse the memories and flashbacks of that time can feel overwhelming and frightening. At times like these, having someone to talk to can feel like an overwhelming need. Often feelings of shame, sadness, despair and anger make us feel alone and isolated and the people in our lives may not understand how these feelings can impact on us and our relationships.

The aim of the **One in Four** Helpline is to offer you a safe space where you can talk about your memories and flashbacks to a non-judgemental person who is there to empathise with your experience in a way which facilitates your complete freedom of expression.

Some of the repercussions of childhood sexual abuse are:

- flashbacks;
- feeling ungrounded
- elusive memories;
- feelings of shame;
- feelings of rage;
- feelings of isolation;
- anxiety and panic attacks;
- grief and loss;
- feeling isolated; and
- feeling misunderstood.

Our Helpline workers are here to support you exploring these feelings and to signpost you to other **One in Four** services or organisations who may be help you.

Every phone call can last up to 20 minutes. If the phone is engaged, please try again. We want to take your call.

For more information on services available, to book an assessment or to arrange to meet with us please see the back page for ways you can contact us.

The One in Four Helpline

020 8697 2112

Monday to Friday 6pm to 9pm

Saturday 1pm to 5pm

24 hour answerphone – we aim to return all calls within one day

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Transport details

One in Four is situated on Bromley Road, between Catford and Bromley, in the block between Bellingham Road and Daneby Road, almost opposite Catford bus garage, above a shop called 'Charmaine Scotts', with uncontrolled residential parking in Bellingham Road and Daneby Road.

Nearest rail station – Bellingham

Bellingham is four minutes walking distance – come out of the station and turn left. At the traffic lights, cross over and turn left.

Bellingham from Blackfriars

Journey time is approximately 21 minutes.

Bellingham from Victoria

Travel from Victoria to Nunhead and change for Bellingham. Journey time is approximately 30 minutes, including a seven minute wait at Nunhead.

Bellingham from Elephant & Castle
Journey time is approximately 18 minutes.

Other rail stations – Catford/Lewisham

Lewisham from Victoria

Journey time is approximately 25 minutes.

Lewisham from Charing Cross, Cannon Street or London Bridge

Journey time is approximately 20 minutes.

Lewisham is also served by the Docklands Light Railway

Buses

Buses 47, 54, 136 and 208 all serve Bromley Road.

For more information

For more information on services available, to book an assessment or to arrange to meet with us, please contact us.



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www.oneinfour.org.uk

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