

# Dealing with Nightmares and Flashbacks

Many people seek counselling for sexual assault or sexual abuse because they are experiencing constant reminders of the event in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. These reminders can be incredibly intrusive and can contribute to the development of anxiety problems, sleep disturbance and feelings of being out of control. Some feel that they are going crazy. Some believe they should not be affected so greatly by the assault or abuse.

## Important things to remember

- Sexual assault is a traumatic event
- People who have experienced a traumatic event often experience flashbacks and nightmares
- You are not going crazy
- There are some things you can do that can help you manage these reminders of the trauma

## Flashbacks

- Flashbacks occur when we are triggered to remember what has happened. A flashback can be a terribly frightening experience, involving all of the senses. Many people say that they can see, hear, smell and feel everything that had happened to them during a flashback. Some people feel as if they are reliving the trauma.
- Identifying your triggers can help you to know why a flashback may occur.
- A trigger is something that causes us to subconsciously switch into a flashback. It can be something like seeing someone who looks like the assailant, hearing a word or a phrase that reminds you of the assault or abuse, driving past the area where the assault or abuse took place, birthdays or anniversaries, childbirth, or television shows. It can be anything. People have their own trigger or triggers that are unique to them.
- Sometimes new memories or things that don't quite make sense may surface in a flashback. This means that your mind is still processing the trauma and trying to make sense of things. Human memory is not like a computer memory where things are straightforward and in a line, it is interwoven with emotion, thoughts and experiences.
- 'Grounding' is a tool that people use to help manage flashbacks. It is used to help you remain in the here and now and not feel like you are reliving the trauma. Some people carry an item that they can grab hold of if they are feeling like they may be triggered, such as a piece of jewellery or a rock. Others remind themselves where they are by looking around and saying what they see.
- It is important that you remind yourself that you are safe and that you are not reliving the trauma, no matter how bad it feels.
- After the flashback is over, try to understand it. Perhaps write it down or talk about it with a trusted friend or a counsellor
- Sometimes it is helpful to rate the flashback, with, for example 10 being the worst, 0 being the best. It can help you get an idea of how things are going for you over time.



Government of Western Australia  
Department of Health

**SARC**

SEXUAL  
ASSAULT  
RESOURCE  
CENTRE

Tel: (08) 9340 1828  
Or Freecall 1800 199 888

## Sleeping Difficulties

People often experience difficulties with sleeping. They may have trouble falling asleep. This may be because they are worried about having nightmares or they feel unsafe. Others wake during the night after nightmares or hearing noises and have trouble getting back to sleep.

There are some things you can do that may increase your chances of getting a better night's sleep.

## Nightmares

- A lot of people experience nightmares. The nightmare can be a replay of the trauma or may be quite bizarre and seemingly unrelated
- Sometimes writing the dream down can help you to make sense of it. Also writing it down and then changing the ending, giving yourself a positive outcome and reading the new ending before you go to sleep at night may change the content of the dream. (You may need to do this a few times.)
- Try drawing or painting the nightmare. It doesn't have to be a masterpiece
- Creative visualisation can help. Visualise yourself having a refreshing night's sleep or having a protective barrier around yourself or your door. Visualise a different ending to your dream
- Talk about your dreams with a trusted friend or counsellor. Talking can make you feel your dreams have less control over you
- Try to understand why you are having nightmares. Nightmares can occur as a result of triggers. If you have not had nightmares for a while or they are getting worse, there could be something happening in your life that may be triggering these nightmares

## Tips for a better night's sleep

- Watch your caffeine intake. More than one cup of instant coffee a day can decrease the chance of you getting a good night's sleep.
- No matter how exhausted you are, try not to sleep in the daytime. You are trying to reprogram your body to sleep at night.
- Use your bed only for sleeping. Don't read, listen to music, use the phone or watch TV while you are in bed.
- Try to get a bit of gentle exercise every day, but don't exercise immediately before going to bed.
- Try to establish a bed time routine. For example, put your pyjamas on or turn back your covers 30 minutes before you plan to go to bed.
- If you can't sleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed and do something else in another room for a while. Keep it gentle.
- Relaxation techniques, such as focusing on your breathing, stretching and yoga, can help.
- Lavender Essential Oil (not fragrance oil) can be great for relaxation. Add one or two drops to a warm bath or put one or two drops on your pillow at night.
- Chamomile tea and other herbal teas can be relaxing. Many are available in supermarkets

## Dealing with Anxiety Symptoms

Many people who have experienced a traumatic incident or incidents can develop anxiety problems. These problems can be related to specific situations, for example going to the supermarket, or may be generalised to any and all situations.

Anxiety symptoms may include a rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, sweating palms, and rapid or shallow breathing. People may experience chest pain, confusion or nausea.



Anxiety symptoms do not mean you are going crazy. We all feel anxiety in particular situations, for example public speaking. Anxiety is a physiological response to a fear-provoking situation. The body gets ready to fight or flee. However, chronic anxiety can cause difficulties in everyday life for people.

People often experience anxiety about experiencing anxiety. They worry that they will lose control or look foolish. Unless you tell them, people around you will probably not be aware that you experience anxiety. Fearing the anxiety reaction gives it more power over you than it deserves.

The following tips may assist you to deal with your anxious feelings

- Try to see why a particular situation makes you anxious. For example, going out at night may make someone anxious if they were assaulted whilst out at night.
- Discuss the anxiety symptom with a trusted friend or counsellor
- If anxiety symptoms are having a serious and continued impact on your life, you may want to consider speaking to a medical practitioner or health professional about these.
- Putting pressure on you to deal with anxiety RIGHT NOW is not a great idea. It makes anxious feelings worse. Try instead to give yourself permission to have these feelings wherever you are. Find a quiet place, go to the bathroom or go outside. Do whatever makes you comfortable.
- If you are going to be in a stressful situation and fear panicking, it may help to visualise yourself going through the experience calmly before it actually occurs.
- Rating your level of anxiety in a given situation may help you feel like you have some control over it and help you to monitor any improvements.

### If you are panicking

- Take deep breaths from the diaphragm. You can lie down and watch your tummy move up and down to practice these deep breaths. Breathing into a paper bag may also be useful if you are hyperventilating. It helps the breathing to return to a normal depth and pace. Try to stay focused on your breathing by counting the breaths or just thinking "breath in, breath out".
- Try visualisations or positive self-talk. For example, try telling yourself you are safe.
- Try using herbal remedies such as Lavender Essential Oil or Rescue Remedy to help you relax.
- Everyone is different and you need to find what will work for you. Try a few different things.
- Don't give up!



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**



Tel: (08) 9340 1828  
Or Freecall 1800 199 888