

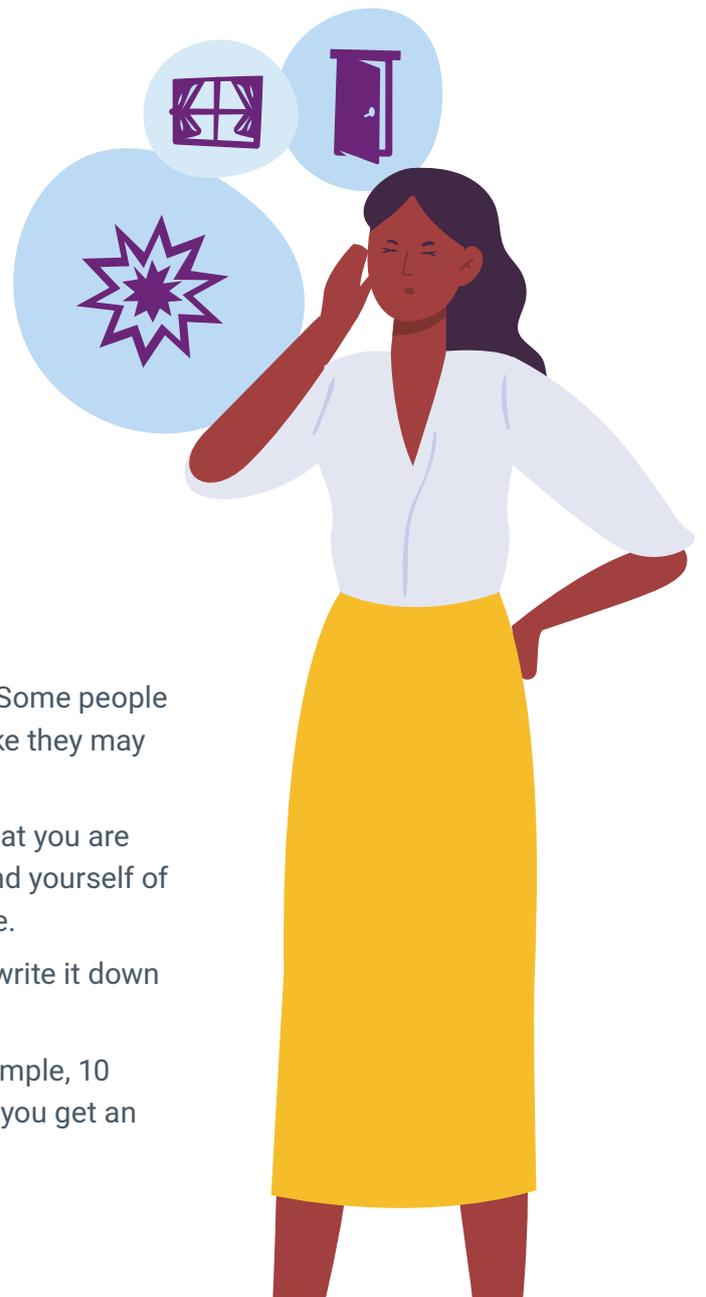


Managing flashbacks and nightmares

Many people seek help following sexual trauma 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 people feel that they are going crazy and others don't understand why they are being affected so greatly by the experience.

Important things to remember

- ▶ Sexual assault and sexual abuse are traumatic events
- ▶ 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
- ▶ Most people recover over time.



Managing flashbacks

Many people use grounding to help manage flashbacks. Some people carry an item that they can hold onto if they are feeling like they may be triggered, such as a piece of jewellery or a rock.

It is important to remind yourself that you are safe and that you are not reliving the trauma, no matter how bad it feels. Remind yourself of where you are by looking around and saying what you see.

After the flashback is over, try to understand it. Perhaps write it down or talk about it with a trusted friend or a counsellor.

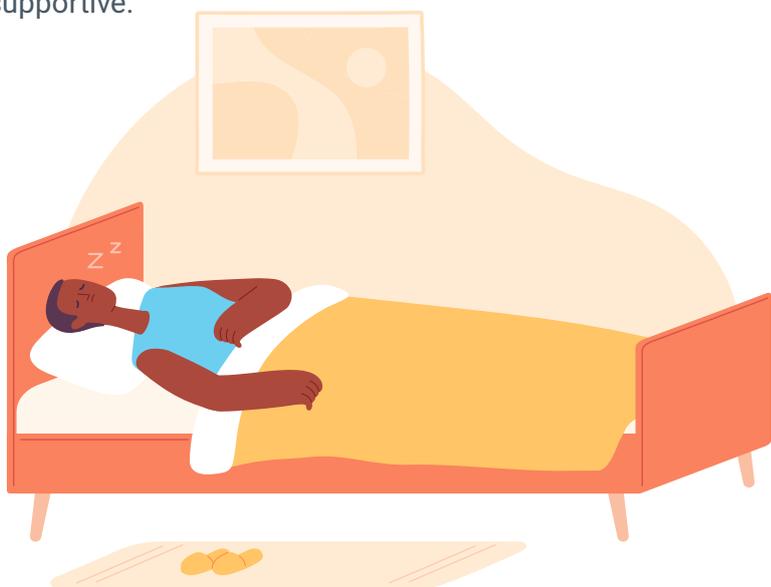
Sometimes it is helpful to rate the flashback with, for example, 10 being the worst, zero having the least impact. It can help you get an idea of how things are going for you over time.

Managing nightmares

Some people experience disturbing nightmares. There are things you can do in the short term and long term to deal with them.

Things you can do to manage nightmares

- ▶ Reassure yourself that you are safe and that the traumatic event that you are remembering is NOT happening now.
- ▶ Breathe slowly and deeply.
- ▶ Be aware of and understand your body's responses as natural physiological reactions to a traumatic experience; try to slow these physical reactions by continuing to breathe deeply and slowly, try to see and imagine your muscles relaxing.
- ▶ Locate yourself in the present; check your present reality by looking around, touching things, stamping your feet, looking in the mirror or talking to yourself.
- ▶ Confirm your physical safety – turn on the lights, walk around the house, check the locks.
- ▶ Have a drink of water.
- ▶ Wash your face or have a warm bath or shower.
- ▶ Focus on something else: read a book or magazine, watch a movie, listen to the radio or relaxing music.
- ▶ Talk with a partner, friend or relative who is supportive.



What you can do if nightmares persist

If a nightmare persists or becomes particularly disruptive or affects you in the morning, try the following exercise.

- ▶ Write the unpleasant dream down in as much detail as you can, but change the ending to give it a more positive outcome.
- ▶ Now, get to know this different version of the dream, read it each night for about 5-15 minutes before going to sleep.
- ▶ Once you have rehearsed the dream, do a relaxation exercise, one that you are familiar with and helps you to fall asleep peacefully. If you wake up, it can be useful to repeat this relaxation exercise, breathing deeply and slowly.

When you are satisfied that you have rewritten the unpleasant dream to better suit you, you can choose to work on another nightmare. Don't work with more than two nightmares in one week. Also take care of yourself; you do not have to over-describe the upsetting content within the dream. Remind yourself that you cannot get hurt or killed from a dream.



Other tips you might like to try

- ▶ Draw or paint the nightmare. It doesn't have to be a masterpiece.
- ▶ Try visualisation. Visualise yourself having a refreshing night's sleep or having a protective barrier around yourself or your door.
- ▶ Surround yourself with familiar things before you sleep, eg: holiday photos on the bedside table.
- ▶ Hang a dream catcher, or place something else symbolic near your bed, to 'catch' or 'ward off' the bad dreams.
- ▶ Talk about your dreams with a trusted friend or counsellor. Talking can make you feel your dreams have less control over you.
- ▶ Sleep with a lamp nearby so that if you wake after a nightmare you can turn on the lamp immediately and see your surroundings to help you relax more easily.
- ▶ 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.

Remember

*You are important
and you can lead the
happy, fulfilling life
you deserve, and heal
from your trauma
experiences.*



Tips for better sleep



- ▶ Limit your caffeine intake. More than one cup of instant coffee a day can decrease the chance of you getting a good night's sleep. Don't have any caffeine after midday. This includes caffeinated energy drinks and tea.
- ▶ Try to get some exercise every day, but don't exercise immediately before going to bed.
- ▶ Use your bed only for sleeping. Don't read, listen to music, use the phone or watch TV while you are in bed.
- ▶ No matter how exhausted you are, try not to sleep in the daytime. You are trying to reprogram your body to sleep at night.
- ▶ Avoid using electronic devices at least four hours before going to sleep.
- ▶ Getting some daytime sunlight can help you to sleep better.
- ▶ Avoid going to sleep on a full stomach or if you are hungry.
- ▶ Try to establish a bed time routine. For example, have a warm shower, put your pyjamas on and turn back your covers 20 minutes before you plan to go to bed.
- ▶ Aim to go to bed and rise at the same time every day.
- ▶ Relaxation techniques before going to bed can help, eg: focusing on your breathing, stretching and yoga.
- ▶ Aim for a cool room (eg: put a fan on, have fresh air) and a warm bed (eg: flannelette sheets in winter, extra blankets). Many people find that a weighted blanket helps them to feel secure and to sleep better (search 'weighted blankets' online for further information).
- ▶ 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 (decaffeinated) herbal teas can be relaxing. Many are available in supermarkets.
- ▶ 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.

Helpful resources

There are many resources available to assist with wellbeing, including books, podcasts and phone apps. The SARC website contains a selection of information sheets that you may find helpful. These include information on calming strategies, apps for mobile phones and a Care Package for survivors of sexual trauma.



The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** is a free 24-hour emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault. Counselling for any sexual assault/abuse experienced recently or in the past is also available to people of all genders aged 13 years and above. Call SARC on **(08) 6458 1828** or Freecall **1800 199 888**.