

Factsheet 7: Understanding and coping with frightening memories (flashbacks)

After traumatic events, people often have sudden and frightening memories of the events, known as flashbacks. These distressing memories are often accompanied by intense feelings of terror, fear, or shame.

A flashback may make you feel like the trauma is happening again. They are often triggered by something in the present that reminds you of past events.

During a flashback you might experience:



Visual flashbacks:

You might see a clear or blurry picture of something frightening in your mind.



Body flashbacks:

It might feel in your body like the frightening past event is happening all over again, right now.



Sensory flashbacks:

You might unexpectedly smell, taste, or hear something familiar from the past that is not actually happening now.



Nightmares:

You might experience nightmares about the traumatic events or other things that give you the same distressing feelings.



Overwhelming fear:

You might feel an overwhelming sense of fear, terror or anxiety, with physical sensations like a racing heart, feelings of tension, or a feeling of being frozen to the spot.

Understanding flashbacks

During traumatic events, our body and mind focus on survival, delaying our ability to make sense of the events.

Flashbacks can happen straight after the event or years later.

Flashbacks may be the body's way of bringing the memories to our mind so that we can make sense of what has happened and heal. Although very distressing, flashbacks can be a sign that our mind and body are ready to start healing.

It's normal to try and avoid distressing memories and situations that trigger fear. People often report a cycle of remembering (flashbacks) and avoiding the traumatic memories and feelings. People can feel on edge and constantly scanning for danger. They might avoid memories, people, places and situations that trigger these painful feelings. While this is understandable, continual avoidance can add to distress over time and reduce our quality of life.

Talking helps

For many people, flashbacks and frightening memories slowly reduce naturally over time. For others, it can feel like they will never leave. While it is understandable to avoid talking about traumatic memories, sharing your experiences with someone you trust can aid healing.

QPASTT offers free and confidential support to help you manage and overcome the effect of these distressing memories.

“Counselling allows you to express yourself freely in a safe environment without feeling selfish.” QPASTT client



Coping with flashbacks and frightening memories

The following exercises can help you manage flashbacks and frightening memories. When practiced regularly, they can help lower the distress related to these memories and slowly restore a sense of safety. Sometimes flashbacks can be so distressing or frequent and you may find these techniques difficult to do on your own. A QPASTT worker can help you use these strategies in a way that is safe for you.



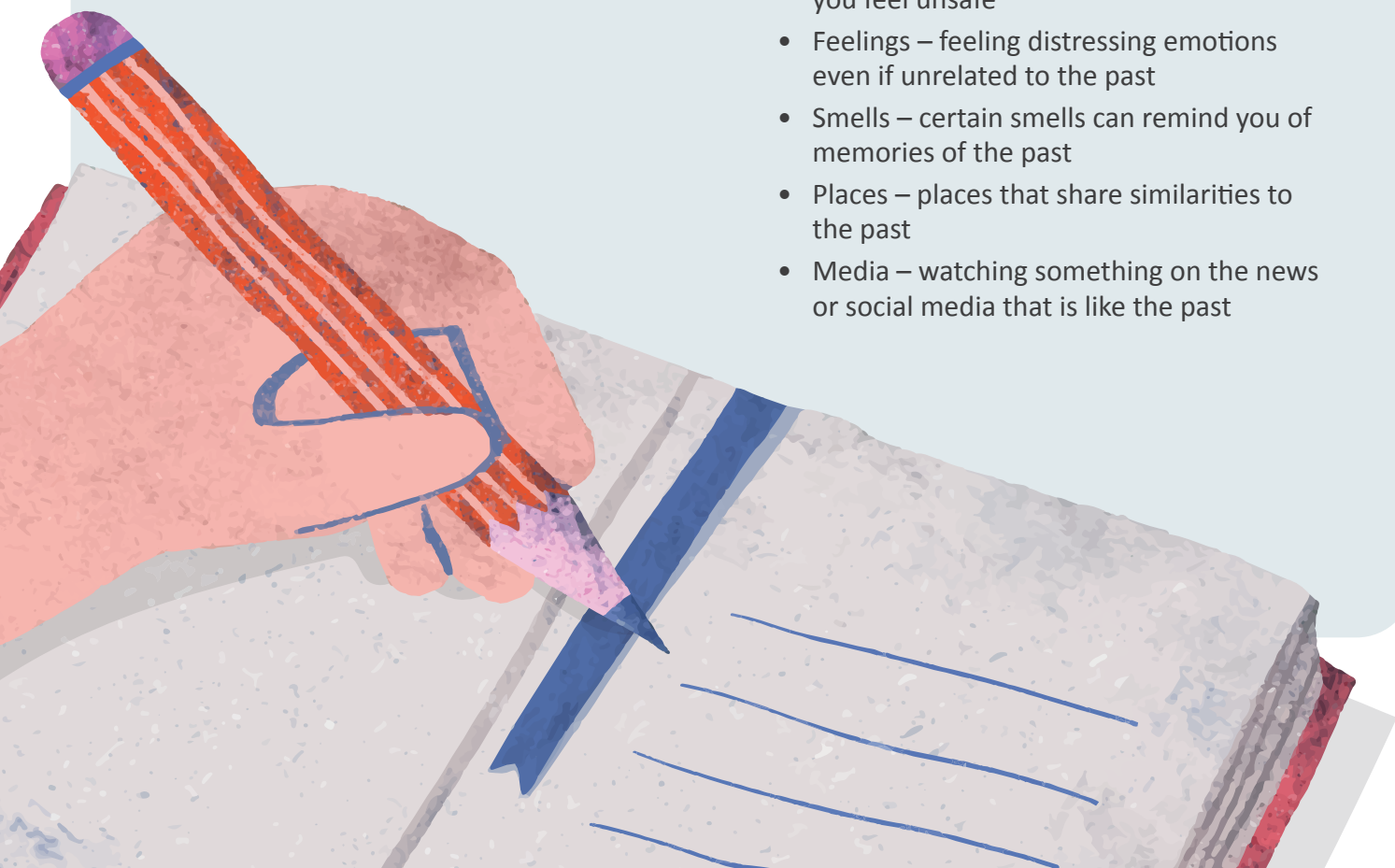
EXERCISE: Keep a diary of triggers

Keeping a diary of the people, places and events that trigger trauma memories can help you prepare for those situations in the future. When we know what triggers us, we can feel more in charge of how we respond so it is less distressing.

Initially, flashbacks can feel like they come from nowhere. However, flashbacks are triggered by something in the present that reminds you in some way of past events.

Things that can trigger trauma memories can include:

- Sounds – hearing certain sounds that remind you of the past
- People – being around people that are linked to or have similarities related to the past
- Thoughts – certain memories or thoughts can bring back other old memories
- Situations – being in a situation that makes you feel unsafe
- Feelings – feeling distressing emotions even if unrelated to the past
- Smells – certain smells can remind you of memories of the past
- Places – places that share similarities to the past
- Media – watching something on the news or social media that is like the past



EXERCISE: Dual awareness

Practicing dual awareness (awareness of two or more things at the same time) means we are paying attention to what is happening inside us (our body and mind) as well as to what is happening around us (in our environment). It can help you stay present and regulate your emotions.

It is most powerful when spoken out aloud. You may need to repeat this exercise several times until your distress eases.

Try to pay attention to your breathing and slow/relax your breathing and body. You can also combine this with the Relaxed Breathing Method in *Factsheet 8: Understanding fear, tension, panic and hypervigilance*.

Practice the exercise below when you are experiencing a distressing memory to help remind your brain and body that you are safe now.

RIGHT NOW, I AM FEELING...(insert name of the emotion/s)

AND I AM SENSING IN MY BODY...

(describe at least three sensations you can feel in your body, e.g. tight shoulders, racing heart)

BECAUSE I AM REMEMBERING...(name the traumatic memory – but don't go into details of the event)

AT THE SAME TIME, I AM LOOKING AROUND WHERE I AM NOW IN... (say the year, e.g. 2025)

HERE IN...(name the place where you are, e.g. my bedroom)

AND I CAN SEE... (describe at least three things that you see right now, in this place)

AND SO, I KNOW IT IS NOT HAPPENING NOW/ANYMORE.

EXERCISE: Sharing your story

There are many ways you may choose to share your story. You may choose to write your thoughts and feelings in a journal. You may write a story, a song, poetry or tell a trusted person.

You may want to consider talking with a counsellor, particularly if sharing your story is very distressing for you.

A counsellor is someone you can talk with confidentially about how you feel and what you are experiencing. They can support you to share your story in a way that is safe for you at a pace that you are comfortable with.

To speak with QPASTT or find out more about our services, please call 07 3391 6677 or visit qpastt.org.au.

QPASTT is the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. It is a community organisation which provides a variety of flexible and culturally sensitive support services to people who have been tortured or who have suffered refugee-related trauma. QPASTT has offices across Queensland.