

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS EXPERIENCING A FLASHBACK

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Crash scenes, shootings, fires, violence, natural disasters and freak accidents. First Responders depend on their training and adrenaline to help when they arrive at a scene. Most of the time, there is a good outcome. Other times, those tasked with saving lives are faced with death. After the urgency of a trauma scene gives way, often they are left with no outlet to handle *all* of what they have seen, heard or done. Such critical incidents may subsequently be recalled as unbidden, intrusive memories, such as images of “frozen moments”, but they can also consist of verbal thoughts, sounds, smells and tastes.¹ In their most extreme form, they are re-experienced as “flashbacks”, which is a very intense reliving of traumatic events as if they were happening again in the present moment. Flashbacks can take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, body sensations, intense feelings or even the lack of feelings, i.e. numbness. Often there is no actual visual or auditory memory; instead they may have a sense of panic, feeling trapped or experiencing a sense of powerlessness. When a person is experiencing a flashback they can feel disorientated or confused about what time it is, where they are or who they are with.

Flashbacks can be debilitating. They can also be made worse by how those around them react. Seeing someone go through a flashback can leave the watcher feeling helpless and uncertain of what to do next to help someone get out of the horror they appear to be living in. Our task is to help the individual normalize and reframe flashbacks so that they can move forward in life. They have been told, or already believe the advice that forgetting is the only way to cope and that “time heals all wounds”. They have also heard that this problem is just in their head, they need to man up, just get over it and move on. However, when we all can grasp the concept that a flashback is a normal reaction and that it is the mind's attempt to make sense of a very important and significant life-changing event, some of the pressure can be relieved.

Here is some practical ways to help someone experiencing a flashback:

1. Before approaching someone who is experiencing a flashback:
 - Pray. Ask the Lord to guide and protect you.
 - Be careful how you physically approach them; never come up behind them, they could react violently.
2. Approach them calmly:
 - Speak softly and gently, like you're waking someone out of a sound sleep.
 - Call their name - many times if you have to.
 - Describe where you are, i.e. “David, David, you're safe. You're in the parking lot at Bob's Pizza, and you're with me.”

- Identify yourself, i.e. “David, remember me, I’m your friend Karen.”
 - Describe what happened i.e. “A car just back-fired as we were going into the pizza parlor.”
3. Let them know that they are experiencing a flashback. Not everyone realizes they are suffering from a flashback.
 4. Remind them to breath. When a person is scared, they stop normal breathing and as a result, their body begins to panic from the lack of oxygen.
 - Symptoms may include: a pounding headache, sweating, tightness in the chest, feeling faint, shallow breathing, shakiness and dizziness.
 - Invite them to focus on breathing with you. Start with where they are and help them slow it down to a more relaxed, deep breathing.
 5. Acknowledge their feelings. Remind them that the feelings and sensations they are experiencing are memories of the past. If a person is worried about future flashbacks have them select an item that can be a cue for them to sort out whether what they are experiencing is real or not. It could be a ring, or a necklace, something of significance which they can keep on them. This item now becomes their touchstone of reality and it will help ground them in the present if they should experience another flashback in the future.
 6. Give them an opportunity to talk about it. Ask them to tell you what they are seeing, smelling, touching or hearing. Sometimes people want us to ask them what they have experienced because talking about it helps them process their trauma. Never force the issue though, because if they are not ready to talk about it, they are not ready.
 7. Help them to identify their triggers. A trigger is “anything, as an act or event that initiates or precipitates a reaction or a series of reactions” (Webster’s College Dictionary). Knowing what their triggers are is half the battle. Examples: gunshots, tire’s screeching, sirens, or burnt meat. Be aware that anniversary dates of their particular traumatic event can be a trigger, and symptoms may start presenting themselves two weeks before the event and up to two weeks after.
 8. Help them identify early warning signs. For some, their surroundings may begin to look and feel kind of out of focus, blurry or a bit fuzzy. Other times, they may feel like they are separating from or losing touch with their surroundings, other people, or even themselves.
 9. Ask them what methods have worked for them in the past.
 10. Use grounding methods. Grounding methods are a great way to help a person who is reliving the past and bring them into the present. These can include:
 - Counting: have them count backwards from 100-0
 - Sound: turn on loud music, or listen to themselves breathing, or traffic, birds, people, etc.

- Touch: pour cold water on their hands or have them touch their clothes, chair or the floor supporting them
 - Smell: have them smell a stick of gum or some other pleasant smell
 - Taste: have them bite into a lemon or eat something spicy hot
 - Sight: Have them look around and see the colors, or the shapes of things, the people nearby, etc.
11. Help them to reestablish their boundaries. Sometimes when a person is having a flashback they lose their sense of where they leave off and where the world begins. It feels as if they do not have skin that separates them. Wrapping them in a blanket or a coat can be helpful.
 12. Remind them to give themselves time to recover. Sometimes a flashback can be so powerful that it takes time to make the transition from such an experience. When a flashback is intense, adrenaline will be dumped into their bodies (the flight or fight hormone) and it will take some time to dissipate. Aerobic exercise such as a brisk walk may be helpful.
 13. Inform them of the importance of flashbacks. Flashbacks can be seen as an indication that they are ready to remember, and it is a great opportunity for them to learn, understand and grow from what they experienced.
 14. Help them honor their experience. What they experienced was horrific, but they have survived. Some find it helpful to make a memorial of some kind to commemorate their experience, such as a buying special plaque or picture, or planting a tree or some flowers.
 15. Remind them to be patient with themselves. That it takes time to process all what they have experienced and that it is appropriate to grieve the loss.
 16. Encourage them to get professional help.
 17. Let them know that they are not crazy; they are on a journey towards healing! (Eccl. 3:1-8)
 18. Pray with them. Bring them to God, for God is the Healer (Ex. 15:26; Psalm 147:3) and you are not! There is a certain level of freedom in knowing that, isn't there? Your job is to create an environment where God has optimal access to that person's body, soul, and spirit. Leading them through these practical steps is one way you can create that environment of healing.

Last but not least, as you help those who have been impacted by trauma, remember to maintain a healthy balance in your own life by creating an environment of self-care. Even Jesus took time to get away from the hustle and bustle of life, and the constant pull on Him emotionally, spiritually and physically. Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ..." and then notice what He says next? He

says you are to “love your neighbor as yourself.” The standard of measurement Jesus uses when He describes how we should love our neighbor is *how we love ourselves*. So, show love to your neighbors by helping them through flashbacks, and show how to love yourself so you can continue to show love to your neighbors!

¹ Ehlers A, Hackmann A, Michael T, Intrusive re-experiencing in post-traumatic stress disorder: phenomenology, theory, and therapy. *Memory*. 2004; 12:403-415. Doi:Doi