

## Symptoms of Traumatic Stress and Grounding Techniques

**Flashbacks** occur when a trigger causes you to remember what happened. A flashback can be a terribly frightening experience, involving all of the senses. Many survivors say that they can see, hear, smell and feel everything that had happened to them during a flashback. After a traumatic experience, it is not unusual to block part of the memory, banish it from consciousness. Sometimes a forgotten memory of rape or abuse will resurface in the form of a flashback, which can be particularly terrifying and confusing. If you are having flashbacks, find a safe place to think about them or talk about them. You can also try the strategies below.

### Dealing with Flashbacks

- Recognize what triggers flashbacks for you. Triggers are all personal to your experience. Identifying and eliminating the ones you can, may keep them from recurring as often.
- Keep a flashback diary to help process your feelings in relation to the flashback.
- Carry something to hold onto, like a rock or a keepsake, so that if you have a flashback, you can hold it in your hand-it can help provide a sense of stability.
- Take a deep breath, exhale slowly. Try to remind yourself of your surroundings... name things in your environment out loud... open your eyes and look around... tell yourself you are safe. Keep doing this until you feel better.
- After the flashback is over, try to understand it. They can be very scary, but understanding them can help you understand your feelings better. Call the SAC or a supportive friend who can listen.
- Sleeping and Nightmares

**Sleep Disturbances and Nightmares** are common responses to trauma. Sleeping can be a very vulnerable time for everyone because we are not aware of our surroundings. You may have difficulty sleeping or you may be awakened by nightmares.



### Sleeping Tips

- Use your bedroom for sleeping only. If you live in a dorm or at home, try to use your desk for activities like studying and reading.
- Make bedtime a ritual, Do the same thing before bed each night (meditate, stretch, listen to calming music, take a hot bath) This can help signal your body that it is time to relax and that sleep is coming soon.
- Avoid caffeinated beverages in the afternoon.
- Avoid exciting activities before bed.
- Lock your bedroom door if it helps you feel safe... or imagine friends and family standing outside of it protecting you.
- Relax each muscle, starting with your feet and working up to the rest of your body... even the muscles in your face can be relaxed. Envision the stress and anxiety just pouring out of you.
- Sleep with a stuffed animal. It isn't silly... if it helps, go with it!
- If you sometimes wake up in the middle of the night, make sure a quiet, relaxing or mundane activity is available to you. Try doing that instead of lying in bed awake.

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## Dealing with Nightmares

- When you wake up, write the nightmare down or try drawing it.
- Try to imagine the nightmare ending differently. For instance, maybe you dream that there is someone outside your door, look around and wake up enough to feel safe. Then put your head down and imagine that a dog is chasing the attacker out of the house.
- Sometimes you might be able to consciously control your dream without ever waking up.
- Talk about them with a trusted friend or counselor. Talking about them can give them less control over us.
- Try to understand them. They can be an important part of healing. You can try to understand them by just thinking about what the nightmare meant to you, or by looking at dream books to find the symbolism in them.

**Panic or Anxiety Attacks** are quick acting physiological reactions the human body can have when we feel fear. It can be very overwhelming and come without warning. If you have them, you are not alone. Some symptoms of a panic attack can include rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing or catching your breath, shaking, tense muscles, your mouth may become dry or you may find it difficult to swallow. These are just a few examples of how the body responds to a panic attack.

## Dealing with Panic Attacks

- You may fear having one in public, at work or school etc. However, there are few outward symptoms. If you are scared of having one in public give yourself permission to go to the bathroom and spend some time by yourself.
- Think about what things you are doing that alleviate your fear... does talking to yourself help, what about deep breathing, or laying down? Explore what options work best for you and practice them when you feel a panic attack coming on.
- Remember, many people experience panic attacks. This is not unusual or weird behavior.
- If you are going to be in a stressful situation and fear panicking, it may help to visualize yourself going through the experience calmly before it actually occurs.



Grounding is a way of coping with stressful times in your life. Symptoms of traumatic stress – like flashbacks, nightmares, memories, anxiety, fear, and other distressing thoughts – cannot always be stopped, but you can learn techniques to minimize their impact. Grounding techniques can help you regain a sense of safety and control in your life by focusing on the here and now and preventing you from getting lost in the past.

The following is a list of different grounding techniques. Choose ones that work for you.

## Symptoms of Traumatic Stress and Grounding Techniques

**Seated Grounded Posture:** Place both feet on the floor and keep your spine straight, but not rigid. Be actively aware of your body and its connection to the ground. Rest your arms and hold your head high. Notice your body and how your feet are resting on the ground. This posture can help you to feel both strong and at ease.

**Mindful Walking:** Walk carefully, mindfully around the room – either in a slow or quick pace. Be present with each step you take. Pay attention to how it feels to walk. Notice your heel and the ball of your foot when they come into contact with the floor. Notice how your knees bend, your toes flex, and you shift weight with each step. Don't let your attention drift, bring it back to your walking. Focus on your body in the present moment. Count your steps in increments of 10 until you feel calmed.

**Writing / Saying Grounding Statements:** Create a few grounding statements that comfort you and remind you that you are safe. Write these on a piece of paper or cue/flash card and carry them with you. You could write some of these statements on a larger piece of paper to hang around your home. You can write in a colour that represents comfort, strength, or safety to you. You can read these statements to yourself or read them aloud. Examples are:

- “This feeling will soon pass.”
- “I am/You are in a safe place.”
- “I am/You are strong; you are safe now.”

**Grounding through Breathing:** Being aware of your breathing can focus and remind you that you are in the here and now. Breathe in and pay attention to the feeling; breathe out and pay attention to the feeling. Focus on the air coming in and out of your nostrils or focus on your abdomen expanding and contracting as you breathe. You can think about breathing in calm and good energy and breathing out anxiety and bad energy.

### Other Grounding Techniques

- Dance and/or sing to a song that makes you feel good.
- Stamp your feet. Feel the power in your legs.
- Visual grounding
  - Make eye contact with a safe person.
  - Scan the room to remind yourself that you are here now.
  - Don't direct your gaze downward: Look up, look out, look around.
- Hold, look at, listen to and/or smell a grounding object that comforts you
  - A smooth stone that you've found on the beach
  - A bell that, when you ring it, has a soothing sound
  - A piece of sandpaper with a course texture
  - A photograph of a beautiful scene or of loved ones
  - A small vial of a pleasant fragrance
  - A piece of jewelry, like a ring or bracelet
  - A picture that you've drawn of a scene that represents safety and comfort.



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## More General Ideas

- Keep a journal. This can be a good way to help process your thoughts and when you look back on old entries you can see how far you have come.
- When you get angry don't be afraid of it. Rip an old newspaper to shreds. Stomp all over a pillow. Run in place. Throw safe objects that aren't breakable into other safe spaces, stomp your feet, yell, scream into your pillow. Do whatever it takes to get the anger out.
- Count to yourself, clap your hands, blink your eyes hard
- Say positive affirmations to yourself
- Listen to a soothing tape, wash your face with cold water, take a hot bath, perform a monotonous activity.
- Use deep breathing, concentrate on every breath in and out.

**Bibliotherapy** refers to the therapeutic or healing effect of reading stories, poems, biographies, or educational books that may help us understand our own experiences. We may find that we experience the same feelings as the author of a book, or a character in a book and can relate to their stories.

**Listening to music can also have a similar therapeutic effect.**

