

## Understanding flashbacks, dissociation, flooding, & numbing

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### Flashbacks:

*'I was travelling along okay and then "BANG", from nowhere, I was straight back there. It spun me out. I had no idea what was happening.'*

A flashback, or involuntary recurrent memory, is a psychological phenomenon in which a person has a sudden, usually powerful, vivid, and 'new' re-experiencing of a past experience, or elements of a past experience. These experiences can be happy, sad, exciting, or any other emotion. The term is used when the memory is recalled involuntarily, and/or when it is so intense that the person 'relives' the experience, unable to fully recognise it as memory, and not something that is happening in 'real time':

- When they occur, the survivor is experiencing the past as if it were happening today.
- As it happens, it is as if the survivor forgets that they have an 'adult' self that is available for comfort, protection, and grounding.
- The extreme feelings and body sensations are frightening because they are disconnected to the present, and often happen unexpectedly.
- Flashbacks are sometimes thought to occur because the survivor may be at a stage to be ready to remember the experience and integrate it with his regular memory.

Flashbacks are often triggered through the senses:

- Visual images: Seeing something that resembles the original abuse (e.g., faces, places).
- Auditory sensations: Sounds that remind the survivor of the abuse (e.g., breathing, hearing someone's anger).
- Emotional memories: Re-experiencing intrusive or constrictive feelings from the past (e.g., fear of someone in authority, rage).
- Body memories: Physical sensations resembling past experiences (e.g., gagging, suffocating).
- Other sensory memories: Smells or tastes (e.g., alcohol, body odour).

### Dissociation:

Dissociation describes a wide range of experiences, from a mild detachment from immediate surroundings, to a more severe detachment from physical and emotional reality. The major characteristic of dissociation involves a detachment from reality, rather than a loss of reality (as it happens in psychosis).

Dissociation can be used as a coping mechanism in seeking to master, minimise, or tolerate stress—including boredom or internal conflict. It can also involve common events, such as daydreaming while driving, a sense that self or the world is unreal, loss of memory, and forgetting identity or assuming a new self. Dissociation can be triggered by trauma, but may be preceded only by stress, substance abuse, or no identifiable trigger at all.

Dissociation is often characterised by:

- Elements of a memory drop out.
- Disconnectedness between awareness of present and past.
- Disconnectedness between thoughts and feelings.
- Experiencing being outside present time and space.
- Experiencing being outside one's own body.

**Numbing:**

Numbing occurs when a person avoids feelings from the present, in particular feelings that may have been present when the traumatic experience occurred. Numbing reflects a constrictive reaction, as depicted in *The Hangover of Trauma*. Feelings can be numbed, body sensations may be absent, and cognitive awareness of these shifts in perception may be quite limited.

**Flooding:**

Flooding occurs when a person is overwhelmed by the feelings that are associated with an unprocessed memory, or that have been avoided for a period of time. Flooding reflects an intrusive reaction, as depicted in *The Hangover of Trauma*. The more one is in a flooded state, the more one is distant from the 'here and now' consciousness.