

GROUNDING TECHNIQUES for Coping with Flashbacks, Distress or Anxiety Attacks

It is normal to experience distress or have some anxiety in certain situation, the aim is to keep it manageable. Key is to be aware and to accept the feelings as they are so we can begin to attend to them with understanding, kindness and compassion. The following are strategies to manage flashback and anxiety. You can go through the list and try one at the time. Choose the strategies that will work best for you. It is best to practice these strategies initially when you are not overly stressed or distressed to check which one are likely to be effective for you.

A flashback is part of the brain's way of working to process traumatic events so that the experience can be filed away as a past memory (rather than a current threat). We can cope with the flashback by thinking less of the past (trauma) and become more focused on the present (safety), by using grounding techniques. We aim to accept the flashback as they are and in time to reduce their impact and vividness. We rewire our alarm system so that over time they have less intensity, frequency and duration.



Anxiety often makes us feel very detached, dissociated, or unreal. Grounding techniques help to bring us back to the here and now, with an awareness of our own bodies. They are strategies that help us to be in the present moment, here and now, rather than in the traumatic experience of the past. The idea is to practise each strategy and learn which one works best for you - whether it's a mental strategy like telling yourself you're safe now, or maybe doing something more physical. The aim is to turn your focus and attention away from the past or future, to be with your feelings in an accepting and to bring a sense of safety into the here and now.

As soon as you become aware of thoughts, feelings or sensations in your body that you identify with a flashback or anxiety attack you can say to yourself:

- **“This is a flashback or anxiety attack”**, “This is what it feels like to have a flashback or anxiety attack”. Labelling the feelings can help with some words of encouragement.
- **“I can face this”**, “I can bear this”, “I let it be”, “It will pass”, “I can deal with this one moment at the time”. I breathe out...
- **“This is just a memory”** - it happened in the past, but it is not happening now. That was then, and this is now. However terrible you feel right now, you survived the awfulness of the past, which means you can survive and get through what you are remembering now.
- **Remind yourself of the date and time** of today and what is going on in your life that you enjoy. Or if it is a flashback remind yourself of events that happened in your life since the trauma. Ask yourself questions in order to bring yourself into the present. (If you wish to write down your own questions on a card and read the card) for example: Where am I, right now? What day is it? What year is it? How old am I? Where do I live? What are the good things that have happened since then?

More strategies during times of high anxiety or distress:

1. **Open your eyes** and put a light on (if it's dark).
2. **Pay attention to your surroundings:** name 5 things that you what you see, hear, smell and touch around you. Look around, notice the colours, the people, the shapes of things. Make it real. Listen to and really notice the sounds around you: the traffic, voices, washing machine, music etc. Be aware of the clothes on your skin, the breeze, touch something soft. Use your senses to bring you back into the present.
3. **Notice your body**, the boundary of your skin, how your clothes feel on your skin, movement in your hair as you move your head, really feel the chair or floor supporting you - how that feels in your feet, your legs, your body.

Push your feet into the ground or push your hands together. Pinch yourself - that feeling is in the now, the things you are re-experiencing happened in the past. That was then, and this is now.

4. **Feel your feet on the ground.** Stand up and put your feet firmly on the ground. Have a sense of your feet on the ground, and the point of contact with the ground. You can push the ground with a sense of releasing your anxiety into the ground. If you like move about: stretch, stamp your feet, jump up and down, dance, run on the spot, rub your arms and legs, clap your hands, walk, remind yourself where you are right now.
5. **Breathe mindfully:** breathe out slowly, a long exhale and then breathe into your belly; put your hand there (around your navel) and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down as you breathe. Imagine you have a balloon in your tummy, inflating it as you breathe in, and deflating as you breathe out. When we get scared, we breathe too quickly and shallowly and our body begins to panic because we feel we can't breathe. This causes dizziness, shakiness and more panic. Breathing slower and deeper will ease the panic. Remembering to breathe out longer than you breathe in. Breathe out to the count of 7, breathe into the count of 3, hold to the count of 3 and then start again breathing out to the count of 7. Repeat for a few breaths.
6. **Rub your arms and legs.** If you have lost a sense of your body, rub your arms and legs so you can feel where your body starts and ends, the boundary of you. Wrap yourself in a blanket and feel it around you.
7. **Walking mindfully.** Notice the way your body moves, how your feet move and feel as you walk, notice your leg muscles, and the way your arms feel as they swing. Notice the movement in your hair, and the sensation of moving air on your skin. Notice the sensations of breathing as you walk. As a point of focus, you can bring your mind back to the sensations of your feet touching the ground with each step.
8. **Be with the Observer, the Wise mind.** Thoughts are not facts. Is this thought true, kind, helpful and pointing to a solution? If not choose again a thought that is helpful, kind and pointing to a solution
9. **Talk to yourself** (in your mind or say out loud if appropriate and you are on your own) gently and calmly like if you were talking to a friend to reassure and encourage. **Describe what you are doing right now slowly**, in great detail to help you to bring yourself in the here and now. Or describe doing a routine activity. Or if you like you can sing a favorite song or a favourite prayer or mantra.
10. **Try to think about different things**, almost like playing mental games, for example, count backwards in 7s from 100, think of 10 different animals, 10 blue things, one animal or country for each letter of the alphabet, say the alphabet slowly, say the alphabet backwards etc.
11. **Carry a grounding object** with you. Some people carry a stone or other small object, perhaps which has personal meaning, to comfort and touch when you need to.
12. **Get support** if you would like it. Let people close to you, that you can trust, know about flashbacks or how anxiety attacks affect you, so they can help when you want them to. That might mean holding your hand, talking to you, helping you to reconnect with the present, to remember you are safe and cared for. If there is no-one, use a helpline.
13. **Self Care:** flashbacks and anxiety are powerful experiences which drain your energy. Take time to look after yourself afterwards. You could have a warm, relaxing bath, a warm drink, play some soothing music, or just take some quiet time for yourself. Be kind to yourself. Harsh self-criticisms are not helpful and will hinder your progress.
14. **Use Positive Coping Statements.** You might prepare a coping statement, for example: " I am safe right now, this is just a memory - that was then and this is now. I am in (place) and the date is (date). This flashback/feeling will pass". Or I am doing well, I am getting better at this I will get over this... it will get easier...
15. **You can also as an observer say:** "(Your name) is safe. She is here (name place and date). She is doing well. She is getting better at this. She will manage this. It will get easier for her. I care about her".
16. **Make an emergency kit bag that** you can use in difficult times, and fill it with meaningful and helpful objects or card reminders of what works for you.

17. **Self-Compassion Break:**(emotional first aid -- talk to yourself like a good supportive friend would

- Being aware of the struggle: “ouch”, “this is tough”
 - Life is a struggle, there are others who suffer like this as well
 - Breathe, soothing touch, smile to yourself with kindness
 - What would I say to a friend or what would a good friend do or say now to me?
 - What do I need, what does this feeling needs?
 - What can I wish myself now?
 - E.g. May I be kind to myself, May I accept myself as I am, May I become stronger, May I find a way to make peace with this, May I have ease of being....
18. **STOP:** Stop, Take a long breath out, Observe, Proceed with what is important
19. **RAIN-** Recognise the feelings or thoughts, **Allow**, Investigate the sensations in the body and mind, **Non-attachment** and nourish yourself
20. **Visualise yourself as a mountain** grounded in the earth, stable and strong or having a
21. **Visualise your mind being like the blue sky** spacious, infinite letting the clouds, the storms come and go, untouched, undamaged by it all.
22. **I am more than this....** I can observe thoughts, emotions as mental events! Thoughts are not facts. This does not define me. I am more than my thoughts or emotions. I can observe them and focus or think something else.
23. **Visualise a compassionate friend** being with you, holding your hands, guiding you, talking to you
24. **Don't look back You are not going that way.**

Modify your thinking over and over again, until the intensity of the feelings is reduced. It takes hundreds of repetition to re-wire the brain!

This advice is of a general nature only and does not take into account particular conditions. For further assistance contact a psychologist.

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