

## Grounding Exercise: Returning to the present moment...

Grounding exercises are used to bring mind back to the present moment. This technique is called 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding technique and is related to mindfulness meditation practices. Instead of focusing on the internal perceptions and cognitions you will turn your attention to the 5 senses by using things that are available in the present moment in your environment. Start by regulating the breath.

- **Sight:** Find 5 things in your environment that you can see. For example, if you were at our desk you might see your laptop, a water bottle, your cellphone, and a pen.
- **Touch:** Find 4 things that you can touch or feel. For example, I can feel the cool air of a fan, the texture of my clothing, my hair on my neck, and my feet on the ground.
- **Sound:** Find 3 things you can hear. For example, I can hear music coming from my headphones, I can hear a fan, and I can hear the sound of people typing.
- **Smell:** Find 2 things you can smell, it may be useful to keep essential oils or a candle around to use. For example, I can smell the fabric softener on my clothes and peppermint oil.
- **Taste:** Find one thing you can taste, it may be useful to keep something around like mints or gum. For example, I can taste this mint.

(Killebrew, N.D.)

## Support From The Gatehouse:

After your intake appointment the programs available to you are:

- Phase 1 Program
- Weekly Co-ed Drop-in
- Partners Support 1-day workshop (attended with your partner)

If you are not at the point in your journey where you feel ready to go into a group you can request *up to six* one-on-one support sessions.

Please note that the programs offered at The Gatehouse are peer-support based and not counselling. For more information and to register call (416) 255-5900.

## Looking for walk-in counselling?

There are various walk in counselling service locations in Toronto. The find the one nearest you visit:  
<http://www.whatsupwalkin.ca/>

*Please note that these times are subject to change without notice.*

## Emergency / Crisis Resources:

If you are in crisis and need of immediate support call 911. You may also request a Mobile Crisis Intervention Team, in this case a mental health nurse will accompany the officer.

Toronto Distress Centre	(416) 408-4357
Gerstein Crisis Centre	(416) 929-5200
Assaulted Women's Helpline	(416) 863-0511
Spectra Helpline	(416) 920-0497
Spectra (Brampton/Mississauga)	(905) 459-7777
York Region Crisis Line	1 (855) 310-2673



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## For Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Coping with Flashbacks



## What are Flashbacks?

Flashbacks can be described as intense re-visualizations of a traumatic event. These unique forms of memory are often very disorganized and include sensory information (feelings, body reactions, and mental processes) that were experienced during the sexual abuse. The main difference between flashbacks and memories of the sexual abuse is the amount of unconscious sensory memory that is “re-lived”. (Hellaewell & Brewin, 2004)

This refers to the fight-flight-or-freeze response that was experienced around the time of the traumatic event. Whether your response was freezing, an intense increase in anxiety from fear, or an attempt to escape, you responded with an act of resistance that was certainly adaptive to your survival in that moment. Now these behaviours that you learned to survive impeding threats, are no longer serving you in the same way. (Hellaewell & Brewin, 2004)

## What Triggers Flashbacks?

Triggers refer to a person, place, thing, sound, smell, or experience that bring you back to the time of the traumatic event. In-other-words, experiencing a trigger can lead to experiencing flashbacks. The question then becomes: How do you know what your triggers are?

- **Reflect:** after the experience of a flashback think back to the things that happened before, sights, smells, sounds, or internal thoughts that preceded.
- **Stress levels:** Related to that fight-flight-or-freeze mode. During this time it more likely for the individual to experience emotional dysregulation and flashbacks.
- **Level of control:** Situations that you find yourself in that increase your stress because you have little control over the potential outcomes.

## Some methods to cope with flashbacks, when they occur...

### Safe Space:

Find an environment that feels safe. If you are unable to find this environment, creating a sense of internal safety through grounding breathing (or trying the exercise on the outer flap).

### Grounding:

During and after a flashback occurs it is common to feel emotionally dysregulated, dissociated, or in a state of heightened arousal. Grounding exercises may help you come back into present moment awareness.

### Reduce Heart Rate / Calm the Body

Once the fear, helplessness, or horror is experienced during a flashback, the body goes into fight-flight-or-freeze mode. To bring the body and the mind back to equilibrium it may be useful to take some long deep breaths.

### Positive Affirmations

Reminding ourselves of the present reality. For example, “here in the present moment in this space I am safe, I am strong, and I am capable of overcoming this.” Positive affirmations may feel silly at first, and you don’t have to say them out loud. Even saying these affirmations in your head can be just as helpful.

## Some methods to help reduce & prevent the experience of flashbacks

The experience of flashbacks can be an extremely torturous effect of trauma. Preventing their re-occurrence, in some cases, is a primary goal. Research has supported the following treatments in reducing the symptoms that follow the experience of a traumatic event.

- **Trauma-specific Counselling:** Receiving support from a social worker, psychologist or other regulated professional who is specialized in providing care for survivors of trauma. (Rector et al., 2008)
- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** CBT is designed to restructure the automatic thoughts, emotions, and actions, that have been learned over an individuals lifetime. Replacing them with restructured thoughts that help the individual better cope with stress, anxiety, and fear. (Rector et al., 2008)
- **Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR):** There is some evidence to suggest that MBSR programs can reduce some of the symptoms associated with trauma, This is commonly used in conjunction with one of the above treatments. (Earley et al., 2014)

## What are some self-help strategies?

One of the main self-help strategies for reducing the experience of flashbacks is reducing overall stress and anxiety and increasing feelings of control. Some suggestions...

- Meditation or trauma-informed yoga
- Creating a routine and scheduling self-care activities
- Grounding yourself if you know you may face an unavoidable trigger
- Creating safe spaces, physically or metaphorically