

Flashbacks

What is a trauma-induced flashback?

Trauma-induced flashbacks often express themselves as mental pictures or feeling states that seem to occur in the present; however, they represent an event or feeling from the past. These flashbacks may occur on a regular basis. When they happen, you may feel “crazy” and “out of control.” If you do not understand the positive purpose of flashbacks, they can be frightening and even life threatening. But if you have an understanding of what causes these flashbacks, they can seem less mysterious, less painful, and more goal directed.

Trauma-induced flashbacks can develop in response to any type of unresolved life trauma, such as a car accident, rape, or sudden death of a family member. These flashbacks may have triggers, such as the anniversary date of the event or particular sounds or smells, but they may also occur without any identifiable trigger.

How can you treat a trauma-induced flashback?

Flashbacks can sometimes provide you with necessary information about the trauma that is not readily available in your conscious mind. To recover from a traumatic event, you must learn and accept the truth of the past. Often this truth was too horrendous to deal with at the time and was blocked from your conscious memory. Flashbacks can help you “unblock” your memories by showing you the truth. Many of those who experience trauma blame themselves. During a flashback, you may see the truth and experience how blameless you are.

When your flashback is over, take some quiet time to reflect on what the flashback may be trying to communicate to you. Write what you learn in your journal to later share with your therapist or self-help group members. If you have neither, share what you learn with a trusted friend. If your symptoms persist, seek help from a licensed mental health counselor.

To find a licensed mental health counselor in your area, visit the American Mental Health Counselors Association.

continued

What is a drug-induced flashback?

Drug-induced flashbacks are an unsettling side effect of drug use that can be experienced in recovery. Drug-induced flashbacks are often described as short experiences of psychedelic symptoms that include visual images, intense feelings, or other experiences similar to those felt during drug use. Visual images may include seeing false motion on the edges of your field of vision, bright or colored flashes, or halos or trails attached to moving objects. These flashbacks can also involve distortions in time, physical sensations, or the reliving of intense emotions, such as anxiety or ecstasy that can last from a few seconds to several minutes.

If you have taken drugs such as hallucinogens or cannabis (marijuana), you may experience these flashbacks. Studies have shown that roughly a quarter of LSD and cannabis users experience some kind of flashback.

Drug-related flashbacks can occur suddenly and often without warning. They may occur within a few days or, in some cases, even within years after drug use has ended. These flashbacks typically occur in people who have used large amounts of drugs during a long period of time, but flashbacks can occur even in people who have used drugs occasionally. People who use hallucinogens such as LSD may experience relatively long-lasting mental disorders, such as schizophrenia or severe depression. The causes of these effects, which in some users occur after a single experience with the drug, are not known.

What causes a drug-induced flashback?

The causes of these flashbacks are not completely understood. Most likely, the use of drugs, such as hallucinogens or cannabis, affect the biochemistry of the brain. It is known that brain chemistry can be altered by drug use. LSD and other hallucinogens affect serotonin and dopamine receptor sites in certain parts of the brain. Even when drug use is ended, the brain may still respond in ways that resemble drug use, which is perceived as a flashback.

How can you treat a drug-induced flashback?

Since flashbacks seem to involve runaway dopamine activity in the brain, the most important thing to do when experiencing a flashback is to relax. Intense fear and panic will only increase the available dopamine and reinforce the intensity of the flashback. If you recognize the flashback as harmless, it probably will be.

continued

Because flashback symptoms may be mistaken for those of other neurological disorders such as a stroke or a brain tumor, sufferers may consult a variety of clinicians before the disorder is accurately diagnosed. There is no established treatment for flashbacks, although some antidepressant drugs may reduce the symptoms. Psychotherapy may help patients relax and adjust to the confusion associated with flashbacks.

Support and understanding can be found in any of the Twelve Step groups, such as Narcotics Anonymous, that deal with drugs other than alcohol. Of course, continued abstinence from the use of illegal drugs is equally important in minimizing flashbacks and preserving peace of mind.