



Moving forward from interpersonal trauma

Week 9: Understanding Flashbacks, Nightmares and Dissociation

What is a Flashback or Nightmare?

Many survivors of abuse experience flashbacks and nightmares. Flashbacks are terrifying experiences where the survivor 're-experiences' the trauma of their abuse, as if it was happening again. Nightmares are similar, but when this happens you are sleeping. You might also find thoughts and memories popping into your head without you wanting them too.

What is Dissociation?

When we are faced with abuse (whether abuse in childhood, domestic abuse, being a political prisoner or a hostage) our safety depends on the actions of others. We cannot control what will happen. The child cannot stop the adult abusing them, or cannot fight back, because they are small and vulnerable, because they depend on the adult (particularly if the abuser is a parent) or because they believe that terrible things will happen if they 'tell'. These terrible things might include a fear of being 'taken away', or of a parent being put in prison, or of not being believed- to name but a few. A child will also have few ways of managing their overwhelming feelings because they have not been supported to learn.

In these situations, our brains can offer us a wonderful survival trick. Technically this is called 'dissociation', but survivors sometimes call it:

- Switching off
- Going to the ceiling
- Blanking out
- Spacing out
- Numbing out

What happens is that while the horror of physical, sexual or verbal assaults are happening, our brains ‘tune it out’. We are no longer consciously aware of what is happening and emotionally we have ‘left the room’. It may be what gets survivors through the abuse.

The Normal Continuum of Dissociation

Everyone dissociates or ‘switches off’ to protect themselves at times. Think back to sitting in your maths classroom (no disrespect to maths teachers). When you heard ‘...Algebra... $x=a+b$...’ and you heard not one word more until knocked back to reality by a voice saying ... ‘You there, the answer is..?’ and you realised that you hadn’t the faintest clue what he/she was talking about-you zoned out because you were bored. The same thing happens either on a really familiar road, or on a long motorway drive. You may suddenly ‘come too’ and realise that you are now at junction 33 and you have no memory of junctions 29 to 32. You were driving on ‘auto-pilot’ and your conscious thoughts were elsewhere. So ‘daydreaming’ is a form of dissociation, which protects us from boredom.

In traumatic or frightening situations there are hundreds of examples of this. Take for instance the observation of World War One soldiers, walking from the trenches and only experiencing the pain of their wounds on arrival at the field hospital. When faced with terror and pain, the soldiers had ‘switched off’ until they reached (relative) safety. Car crash survivors often describe the experience as if it were happening in slow motion, disjointed or as though happening to someone else. Political prisoners and hostages who are being tortured report teaching ‘dissociation tricks’ to one another to survive.

Dissociation and Children

Although dissociation can happen to anyone faced with trauma (or boredom) it is particularly common in children. Children may have fewer other coping mechanisms available to them (you rarely hear a child say, ‘I’m feeling stressed so I’ll go for a walk/hot bath/do my breathing exercises/phone a friend’) and children are more prone to getting into trance like states or getting engrossed in imaginary worlds. You only have to watch a child playing their favourite game

to see that. Therefore, children who are abused are more likely to dissociate or 'switch off' during their trauma.

When Dissociation Becomes a Problem

If we only have to dissociate on the rare occasion when something out of the ordinary happens (such as a car crash) it probably ends there. However, what often happens in childhood abuse is that the traumas happen time and again, over potentially quite a long time. In this case, dissociation or 'switching off' starts to happen more and more often. As we use 'switching off' to cope (and it works) it starts to be triggered by more and more things. It works so we keep doing it. However, over time this can become a problem in itself. But remember that you rarely choose to dissociate, it mostly happens automatically, out of your control.

The 'side effects' of regularly dissociating

- **Memory becomes jumbled up and patchy.** If you are not 'switched on' for periods of time then the normal process of recording memories in our brain doesn't work and it can be hard to recall what happened when. This is really distressing for survivors and it can leave you wondering what is and isn't real. It is really hard to make a clear story for others to understand what happened. This can lead you to feel that others don't believe your experiences.
- **You may start to use dissociation in a whole range of stressful situations.** This stops you learning other ways of coping and may make 'giving up' dissociation harder. It is important to practice your safe coping skills as often as possible, so you can confidently use them if you need them.
- **Dissociation can get you into difficult situations.** For example, when faced with a boss or a teacher giving you instructions and you 'switch off', you are likely to miss important information and be more likely to fail.
- **'Switching off' when faced with your memories of the abuse can make it harder to learn to deal with them.**
- **You may find you lose time** or are not aware of the passage of time. This can make keeping appointments and remembering things that you plan to do difficult.

- For some survivors, the **dissociation can be even more disruptive in their lives**. Some describe finding themselves in places they do not remember getting to. Some find things in their cupboards that they do not remember buying or that people speak to them when they cannot remember meeting them.
- **A few may find that chunks of their life are not always in their awareness or memory.**

NOTE: If you do not have specific memories of the abuse, or your memories are patchy, repeatedly ‘searching’ your memory or using techniques such as hypnosis or regression is NOT recommended. You may never get to know ‘the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth’, it is just not how memory works- our memory of the past is not a ‘tape recording’ that you replay. It’s much more important to make sense of what you do know about yourself and your life than to find out ‘facts’.¹

Managing Flashbacks, Nightmares and Dissociation

Flashbacks are when you are awake and ‘relive’ some parts of your abuse experience. Nightmares are when the distressing memories resurface when you sleep. They are like the flip side of dissociation. Dissociation is when you leave the dangerous current situation and go somewhere ‘safer’ in your mind. Flashbacks and nightmares are when your body is safe (usually-if not go back and look at the safety stuff), but your mind goes back to somewhere in the past that was dangerous.

Flashbacks and nightmares are terrifying, often seeming to ‘come out of the blue’ and feeling out of control. Sometimes survivors try to avoid sleeping because they become so fearful of the nightmares. Others find they disrupt their already difficult sleep patterns by waking them and finding it hard to go back to sleep.

Managing flashbacks and nightmares can be difficult. Many people will need some specialist support to do this and to fully recover from flashbacks you may need to let yourself go back over the details of what happened to you. This can be done formally in therapy, but also can be done with the support of people

¹ Taken from The British Psychological Society (2000) Guidelines for psychologists working with clients in contexts in which issues related to recovered memories may arise.

who will help you to remember, safely and at your own pace. We will look at this in more detail in week 10. But there is a lot that can be achieved from learning some techniques to 'manage' the dissociation, flashbacks and nightmares.

If flashbacks are a particular problem, try to keep a diary. This will help you to understand any patterns or triggers and will help plan your individual work. Remember, information about what is going on for you is a very powerful tool. It can make the patterns appear more clearly and therefore you feel less out of control. Use your diary to learn from situations that you didn't manage to take control of and rehearse in your mind what you would ideally like to do differently another time.

The most important thing to remember with both flashbacks and nightmares is that, although it may feel real at the time and is very distressing at the time, they are memories.

Mindfulness

Dissociation, flashbacks and nightmares happens when our attention leaves the current situation, either zoning out or going back to a scary moment in the past.

The treatment or 'switching back on' after the 'switching off' is to deliberately get your attention back into the present. We have discussed mindfulness in the sessions on anxiety, but it is also very useful here. There are hundreds of ways you can do this, but you will need to use the 3 p's to get good at them. The trick is to do these things 'mindfully'. That is when you try them, focus all your attention very deliberately on the thing you are doing. Use all your 5 senses. Focus your attention on each of the senses in turn. Just observe, don't judge.

You can practice this by doing something you would usually do automatically (such as make a cup of tea or coffee) but do it 'mindfully'. Pick up the mug, is it heavy? Is it light? Is it warm or cold? Turn on the tap, what does the water sound like? Is the water cold? Concentrate on the sensation in your arm as the water (listen to it) runs into the kettle. What does the tap feel like when you turn it off? Smell the coffee/tea. Notice the sound of the boiling water. Notice the patterns the steam makes.....There is a lot more to making a cuppa if you do it 'mindfully'. This also helps you stay connected (and in control) in the present.

Grounding

Grounding is another technique which is designed to help keep ourselves 'in the minute'. Very often, this present moment is OK, it's what's happening with flashbacks and nightmares that is the problem.

- Tell yourself (firmly) what the day, date and time currently is. Remind yourself of your age now. **REMINDE YOURSELF THAT CURRENTLY YOU ARE SAFE.**
- **Stamp your feet and feel your feet in contact with the floor**, cross your arms and legs and concentrate on how that feels.
- **Breathe (mindfully)**
- **Focus on something in detail**, a picture, a poster, the design on a cup. What colours, shapes, images are there?
- **Go outside, feel the wind against your skin.** Touch leaves/ grass/ stones. Do it mindfully
- **Focus on a conversation** someone is having (...mindfully)
- **Put a cool cloth against your face** (...mindfully)

The good news on flashbacks is that no matter how distressing they are to you emotionally, they cannot hurt you and you can learn to control them. Just remember the (by now boringly familiar) rules of the 3 P's

- **Preparation**
- **Practice**
- **Patience**

Take care and take it at your own pace. Please complete the exercises in the key points handout. Treating flashbacks and nightmares often requires talking about what has happened to you. This might be the next step on your journey.

Remember the important part of small steps is steps!