

Flashbacks

by Sandra Felt, LCSW

Whenever we have an overwhelming experience, we have an amazing capacity to set aside the most intense portions of that experience to deal with later. We sometimes call this phenomenon “flipping into survivor mode” and that is exactly what it is. Setting aside the most intense parts (dissociating) enables us to survive. It works well at the time.

Then later, perhaps years later, when we are safer, away from the traumatic situation and perhaps grown up, “the rest of the story” returns to help us finish healing that overwhelming experience. It is as if something inside us holds those most intense portions to protect us from them as long as we need it to. Then, when it believes we can handle them, it begins to return these leftovers as if it is asking, “Are you ready to finish this memory yet?”

We call these returning moments “flashbacks.” We flash back to whatever remains unprocessed from those earlier overwhelming events, especially the feelings we found too intense to handle at the time. Flashbacks can be “triggered” by any little thing in the present that we associate with the earlier event, perhaps a specific touch or word someone says.

No one welcomes these awkward moments. Why would we? They suddenly and without warning interrupt our current activities. They remind us of experiences we want to forget. They take us to intense feelings we want to avoid—perhaps terror, rage, desperate aloneness, and powerlessness. We might think we are going crazy, we hate losing control, and we might be scared “it” is happening again now.

And yet these seemingly horrific flashback moments come bearing a precious gift, an invitation to heal those old wounds. They show us that now we have a very important choice: continue to do our best to shut down these memories or begin to choose an alternative path to complete and heal them.

If we choose to heal the past traumatic wounds, we need to learn to: (1) recognize when we are triggered into a flashback, (2) develop the skills and courage to safely process through the intense feelings, and (3) understand that the trauma is from the past rather than happening now. We must know that we are safe enough now to begin this incredible healing process that is naturally built into our body and psyche. To feel safe enough, we may need the support of others who are not afraid of the intense feelings, who understand and trust the healing power of flashbacks, and who help us feel safe. We may need a professional trauma-informed psychotherapist.

While healing past wounds is rarely easy or fun, it truly is worth the effort it takes. The freedom to go on with our lives without feeling victimized by flashbacks comes when we know and trust that we have the safety, strength, skills, courage, and support necessary to choose to move through them to heal.