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Coping with Flashbacks, Nightmares and Intrusive Thoughts

Introduction

A trauma is an event or experience that is deeply distressing to someone.

Any rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse is a traumatic event which people will react to in different ways. After such a trauma some people start to re-experience the trauma in the form of:

- Flashbacks: The term 'flashback' is used to describe a type of remembering where vivid memories of past trauma are recalled in a way that makes it seem as though the trauma is happening again now.
- Nightmares: You may experience dreams about the sexual violence or sexual abuse that happened in the past. Nightmares can often be about fears and/or memories that are too distressing or painful for you to think about when you are awake. However, nightmares are not always an accurate idea of what happened in the past.
- Intrusive Thoughts: These are intense thoughts or memories that come out of nowhere, particularly when a person's mind is not occupied. There is the sense that the trauma is being remembered, but without a feeling that the trauma is being re-lived.

There are often triggers for these types of re-experiencing. Triggers can take many different forms such as:

- Images.
- Sounds: like music, breathing, doors shutting or footsteps.
- Emotions: feelings of distress, anger, danger or a lack of feelings (numbness).
- Physical: sensations such as pain or nausea.
- Smells and tastes.

These types of re-experiencing are common after experiences of trauma and are not a sign of being 'weak' or 'crazy'.

This booklet will explain what these reactions are and give a few suggestions on how to cope with them when they happen. Gaining control over these reactions can be a slow step-by-step process, and these strategies, along with your counselling, will help you to begin this process.

Some descriptions of re-experiencing:

"I watch what happened to me, like seeing it on a film"

"It's as if I am back living that event again, over and over"

"I just can't stop thinking about and remembering what happened to me."

Re-experiencing traumas can:

- Be upsetting and painful.
- Disturb your daily living and happen when you are not expecting them.
- Make it feel like you are back in the past.

This booklet will give you a few ideas of ways to cope with this re-experiencing so that you can see what works best for you. Using these when you are re-experiencing can help you through the difficult feelings you have at these times.

When we experience a traumatic event, the memory of this event becomes stored in a different way, in a different part of our brain, from other day to day memories. When traumatic events take place, our bodies are under pressure, and because we are not calm or relaxed, we cannot process the information in an effective way.

Grounding (see overleaf) can help provide relief from these traumatic memories and can work before your counselling starts and alongside your counselling. Part of how counselling can help is to transfer the memory of the trauma from the part of the brain where trauma memory is stored, into the part of the brain that contains day-to-day memories, so that you experience it less as happening over and over again in the same way. Counselling can help with this by allowing the trauma to be heard, acknowledged and felt within a safe and supported environment.

The First Steps

If you have a re-experience:

- 1) Find a safe and peaceful place where you feel comfortable sitting or lying down.
- 2) Remind yourself that you are re-experiencing and that this is normal following traumatic experiences.
- 3) Remember that the worst is over- what you are remembering happened in the past and is not happening now.

- 4) Breathe calmly and slowly. Put your hand on the area above your belly button and feel it go up and down as you breathe in and out. Try counting to 5 as you breathe in and 5 as you breathe out.
- 5) Some people find it helpful to tell the people they feel close to about the re-experiencing so that they can help when needed.
- 6) Re-experiencing can be a powerful experience. Be kind to yourself after you have a flashback or a nightmare. This might mean having a relaxing bath, a sleep, a warm drink or just taking some quiet time for yourself. Remember that you deserve to be taken care of.

Dealing with Nightmares in Particular

Nightmares can often be a way for individuals who have had difficult experiences to start to make sense of what happened to them. However, they can still be very frightening.

- 1) If you have had a nightmare and have woken up, stay still in bed and lie quietly. Remind yourself that what you just experienced was a nightmare, and that you are safe right now.
- 2) Remind yourself to breathe calmly and slowly. Again, put your hand on the area above your belly button, and feel it go up and down as you take breaths in and out. Try counting to 5 as you breathe in through your nose, and again as you breathe out through your mouth.
- 3) Some people find it helpful to stay in bed for 15-20 minutes using the techniques outlined above, as they find they can go back to sleep. If you do not fall back asleep, wait a while before you get up.
- 4) Breaking up your sleep can sometimes make you feel more worried and can also become a habit, which impacts on your sleep the following night. If after this time you still do not feel tired, get up.
- 5) If you do get up, do something calming like making a warm drink or having a bath. Try to avoid having caffeine or cigarettes. Some people find it helpful to listen to relaxing music or read a magazine to distract themselves from thinking about their dream. Try to avoid watching TV or reading a book.
- 6) When you begin to feel tired again, go back to bed and lie calmly. Remind yourself that you are safe. It is helpful to breathe calmly and slowly to help you to go back to sleep.

There are further suggestions in this booklet that may also be helpful to make you feel safe and calm after having a nightmare.

Grounding

Grounding is a set of skills that help you “switch off” the upsetting memory and to separate yourself from difficult feelings. This means that when your thoughts and/or feelings are too intense, grounding can give you a safe way to feel more in control of what you are thinking and feeling. Grounding can also allow you to find a balance between feeling emotions too much or too little.

Grounding can be used when you:

- Feel upset.
- Have a flashback.
- Have just had a nightmare.

One of the main goals of grounding is to focus on the things around you, and remove the focus from yourself and your memories.

What we know is that while we are able to pay a little bit of attention to a few things at once, we can really only focus on one thing at a time. This means if we concentrate on one thing that is neutral (no good or bad emotions towards it), or that is pleasant, then we will not have enough attention left to think about the unpleasant memories.

Two ways of grounding are described in this booklet:

- Using your mind
- Using your body

Some people find that one type works better for them, and others find all types helpful. What is important is that you find what works best for you.

Grounding Strategies Using Your Mind

- Grounding can be used any time/place and no one has to know that you are doing it.
- Try to think about things neutrally. Avoid thinking of things as good/bad or like/hate.
- Focus on the present and your surroundings. Try not to think about the past or the future.

- Practice as often as possible, even when you do not need to be grounded. If you are able to use these strategies easily when you already feel relaxed, they will be much more helpful when you are feeling strong or intense feelings.
- Notice which strategies or combination of strategies you like best.
- Create your own methods of grounding. Any method you create may be much more helpful for you than those you read here, because it is your own and will carry a special significance.

There are a number of strategies using your mind that may be helpful.

1. Distraction

Distraction is a strategy where you try to think about and focus on things that are around you.

- Look at the space around you as if you are a detective. Describe objects, sounds, textures, colours, smells, shapes, numbers and temperature.

- Do not just notice “the chair is green”, but look at it more closely. Is it textured? Is it fabric or plastic? What shade of green is it? How would you describe the shape?

2. “Grounding” Image

This is an imagined place that can relax and distract you from re-experiencing. It should be a safe place in your imagination where you can go whenever you want to feel calm.

Spend some time thinking about your relaxing, safe place. It can be somewhere real or you can create a place that you think would be safe.

- It should be somewhere for only you and those you trust completely.
- It should provide you with a sense of protection and security.

Make the place as interesting as possible. If it is a place you would want to go to and you can picture it with lots of details, it is much more likely to distract you. For example, if you choose a garden:

- Know the layout so that you can walk around it.
- Imagine different flowers having different smells.

- Imagine the sounds of fountains, birds or the wind.
- If you enjoy the feeling of the sun on your arms, make it a warm day.

To make the place easy to bring to mind when you are re-experiencing, it is important to practice going to this place when you are relaxed. The more you practice going to this place in your imagination when you are relaxed, the more easily you will be able to imagine it when you are feeling intense emotions.

An extra useful stage when developing an image of a safe place is to create a way to get to your safe place. This is often called a “bridging” image.

Sometimes, you may be re-experiencing and need a bridge to get you to your safe place.

Bridging images that others have often found helpful include:

- Flying away from the re-experienced memory and into your safe place
- Imagining changing the TV channel away from the flashback, and into your safe place
- Having a brick wall crumble, allowing you to leave your memories behind and walk into your safe place.

3. Developing a “Grounding” Phrase

A grounding phrase is a few words which are positive and remind you that you are surviving in the present.

Phrases can range in length. Some prefer a brief statement, such as, “I am okay.” Others use longer statements like: “I have lived through my past. I am strong now and I believe in myself.”

Some find it helpful to leave reminders of their phrase around the house. This allows you to become more familiar with it so you can recall it more easily when you need to ground yourself.

If you find music more grounding and soothing, you can try singing a phrase to yourself.

4. Other Grounding Strategies using your mind

- Play a categories game with yourself. Think of all the TV shows, foods, animals, songs or any other category that you can. Think of your favourite of each of these too.
- Say kind statements to yourself. For example, “You are a kind person who is having a difficult time right now. But you are strong and will get through this.”
- Say coping statements to yourself. For example, “I can deal with this” or “These difficult feelings will pass.”
- Picture people that you care about (friends, family) or look at photographs of them.
- Think about things you are looking forward to in the next week or month.

Grounding Strategies Using Your Body

There are also a number of strategies using your body that you may find helpful.

1. Using a “Grounding” Object

A grounding object is a comforting, physical object which carries a positive meaning for you and can distract you when needed.

It should:

- Be something that you did not own when the trauma happened (something that is from the present).
- Be small enough that you can carry it with you and hold it when you are re-experiencing.

When you start to re-experience, hold your grounding object and really focus on it to distract you from your memories. Focus on the colour of it, the different textures (temperature, roughness, smoothness, etc.).

Many people find smells are great distractions, so using something like a perfume or a scented candle can work very well.

2. Other Grounding Strategies using your body

- Run cool water over your hands, noticing how this feels against your skin.
- Tightly hold onto the arms of your chair as hard as you can, noticing the tension you feel when doing this.
- Touch every individual object around you: your keys, your clothing, a table, the walls. Notice textures, colours, materials, weight, temperature. Compare the different objects you touch: Is one colder? Lighter?
- Notice your body. The weight of your body in the chair; the feeling of wriggling your toes in your shoes; the feel of your back against the chair. All of these feelings are things you are experiencing in the present.
- Walk slowly, noticing each footstep, saying “left” or “right” with each step.
- Eat something, describing the flavours in detail to yourself.
- Focus on your breathing, noticing each breath as you breathe in through the nose, and out through the mouth. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each in breath. For example, a favourite colour, or a soothing word such as “safe” or “easy”.

Relaxation

The following strategies are ones which can help you to breathe more deeply and relax your muscles more fully.

Having these skills, can help you to relax your body, and decrease feelings of tension. These strategies, if practiced regularly for several weeks can have many positive effects such as:

- Reduced feelings of anxiety
- Fewer headaches
- Better sleep
- More control over panic attacks
- Fewer feelings of stress
- Increased relaxation

Before doing any relaxation, it is important to make sure you have the following:

1. Controlling your Breathing

- A quiet place, with as few distractions as possible. If possible, minimise background noise as much as possible, and try to practice relaxation when you are less likely to be interrupted.
- For example, it might be a good idea to turn off your phone.
- A comfortable position that is as restful as possible. This will mean the least amount of effort for your body.
- For example, you might support your head and arms, or choose to take off your shoes and prop your feet up several inches.
- A word/sound that you can repeat silently or in a quiet, gentle voice. This repetition can give you a focus during the relaxation.
- For example, “one” or “calm.”

When we are afraid, a normal reaction is to breathe faster than usual or to gasp air in. Our body works so that when we breathe in, we take in oxygen, and when we breathe out, we release carbon dioxide and oxygen.

When we hyperventilate, we breathe too fast, breathing out too much carbon dioxide. This creates an imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. This also causes many of the physical feelings we get when we feel anxious, such as feelings of faintness, dizziness, sweating and heart racing. Unfortunately, this also makes you feel short of breath, meaning you might try to breathe even faster, which makes the imbalance even greater.

When you feel yourself becoming afraid, it's important to try to breathe very slowly and smoothly. Some people find the following strategies helpful:

- Breathe through your nose. It makes it much harder to breathe quickly.
- Breathe in and out of a paper bag. Hold the bag tightly round your mouth and nose, breathe out into the bag and then breathe the same air back in. By doing this you breathe back in the carbon dioxide you have just breathed out, which corrects the balance in your body.

Over breathing can become a habit so that people breathe too fast, or sigh a lot, even when they are not afraid. Practicing breathing slowly and becoming more aware of your breathing can help to stop this from happening.

2. Relaxation Exercise

Slowly go through each section and take time to notice what sensations you experience:

- Sit on a chair with your legs uncrossed and feet on the floor.
- Place your hands on your thighs.
- Feel the support of the chair against your back.
- Feel the seat of the chair underneath you, and the floor underneath your feet.
- Notice how solid the chair is. Notice how solid the floor is.

- Close your eyes and take three deep breaths.
- Breathe in through your nose, and out through your mouth.
- Try and make the out breath longer than the in breath.
- Notice the feeling of your tummy filling with air.
- Notice the feeling of your shoulders getting heavy and dropping slightly.

- Breathe slowly in, and out. At the end of the out breath count one in your head.
- Breathe in, and out again, counting 2 in your head at the end of the out breath.
- Continue with this until you have reached to 10 and then start again. Try to count to 10 three times.

If you get distracted – which you probably will – either start counting where you left off or start at 1 again. You have not failed and should not give yourself a hard time about this. If thoughts come into your head, notice that, but gently let them pass by focusing on your breathing or counting again.

When you finish the practice, notice any changes in your body. For example, does it feel heavier, or lighter?

3. Deep Muscle Relaxation

This relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you to tense, and then relax. While doing this type of relaxation, you should try to breathe in when tensing and breathe out when relaxing.

- Start by making yourself as comfortable as possible. You can either lie down, or sit relaxed in a chair.
- Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in through your nose, two, three, and out through your mouth, two, three.
- When tensing each part of your body, notice the way this feels and tension this produces in the muscles in that area.
- Focus on the tension for a few seconds and then relax that part of your body letting go of the tension in the muscle. Allow your muscles to relax as much as possible.
- Notice the difference in the way the muscles feel when they are tensed and when they are relaxed.
- You might feel a slight tingling; this is the relaxation beginning to develop.
- Try keeping a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 0-10.

Do this with each muscle group. It can be helpful to use the same order each time as you work through the muscle groups.

As a suggestion, you can try the following:

- Hands: Clench, then relax.
- Arms: Bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension, especially in your upper arms, then relax.
- Neck: Press your head back and then slowly roll it from side to side. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position. Notice the relaxation.
- Face: There are several muscles here, but concentrate on your forehead and jaw. Lower your eyebrows in a frown. Then relax your forehead. Raise your eyebrows, and then relax them again. Clench your jaw, then notice the difference when you relax.
- Chest: Take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax.

- Stomach: Tense your stomach muscles as tightly as you can and then relax. Often, our breathing can become irregular after tensing our stomach muscles. Take a few minutes to re-focus on your breathing.
- Buttocks: Squeeze your buttocks together, and then relax.
- Legs: Straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Then relax.
- Finish by wiggling your toes.

Deep muscle relaxation is a skill that can teach you to notice areas of tension in your body and how to relax your body and mind. As you regularly practice tensing and relaxing each muscle in your body, you will become better able to recognise and notice tension in your body throughout the day. When you have developed this skill you will get to a stage when you can just learn to relax the existing tension in your body without having to first tense your muscles. This means you can use it anywhere to relax your body when you begin to notice tension.

It is important to remember that this is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced before it can be used in different situations when you are feeling very tense. Like many skills, this relaxation technique takes time to develop so you can use it effectively.

Conclusion

Although the ideas behind grounding and relaxation are simple, the success of these strategies requires personalisation and practice. Personalisation means discovering which strategies or parts of strategies work best for you. It is very normal for some techniques to work better for some people than others. This might mean trying a lot of different strategies, each for a few weeks. It's important not to give up after trying one or two techniques once or twice. Noticing the strategies that work best for you, and when, can be extremely helpful so you can use these when you need them the most.

The success of these strategies also depends on practice. Distracting from re-experiencing is difficult, but will be much more manageable if you have practiced using these skills regularly and can easily put them into place when you are relaxed.

The types of re-experiencing discussed in these pages can be very draining, and it is important to remember to be kind to yourself after you experience one of them, and to remind yourself that they are a normal experience. With the use of the discussed well-practiced techniques, you can start to become more in control of your intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares.

You may find that these ideas and techniques are a useful support to you as you go through counselling.