

# Flashbacks and intrusive memories: what they are

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Both flashbacks and intrusive memories are related to reliving a traumatic event. During a flashback, the person thinks they are back in the original traumatic situation. In a sense, he/she has disconnected from the present and is stuck in the past. During an intrusive memory, the person knows they are not back there, but the memory is so powerful he/she may as well be.

Both flashbacks and intrusive memories can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few hours. In both, the person may alternate between the current reality and the past reality. In both, the person may or may not act as if he/she is in the original traumatic situation.

“Flashbacks are not a sign that you are losing your mind, but rather that some traumatic material is breaking forth into your consciousness,” writes PTSD expert Dr. Aphrodite Matsakis in her book *I Can't Get Over It*. “The more you deal with the trauma on a conscious level—by talking about it, writing about it, or otherwise getting it out into the open—the less need there will be for it to appear in flashbacks or nightmares.” The same is true of intrusive memories.

## Dissociation

A common way for survivors of traumatic events to deal with flashbacks and intrusive memories is to dissociate. Dissociation is a way to disconnect from pain that's too severe to face at the moment.

According to Matsakis, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk identified four kinds of dissociation. In the first kind, the senses and emotions disconnect. While the person may see something, they don't react as expected or at all. The second kind is called “depersonalization”, and it occurs when the person feels like a robot or a thing instead of a person. The third kind is a detachment, which often results in partial or total amnesia of the traumatic events. In the fourth kind, the memory is compartmentalized, with the extreme form being dissociative identity disorder (formerly multiple personality disorder).

I've seen all four types of dissociation among people with BPD. For example, I self-injure when I start to suffer from depersonalization. I cut myself, burn myself, or hit myself in order to feel something instead of nothing. For me, self-injury is a way to deal with unbearable emotional pain by feeling physical pain.

I also have a partial amnesia of traumatic events. I have had to learn to accept this and recognize that my mind just isn't ready to face the pain of the past. Maybe someday I'll be able to face it, but for now there's either no memory or a very hazy memory.

## Living with them

Each person has to find his or her own way to live with flashbacks and intrusive memories. What works for one may not work for another.

Mindfulness meditation is one way to help. Watch your thoughts come and go without judging them. Center yourself in the present and focus on staying aware of your surrounding environment as well as your emotions.

Another way to help is to visualize a safe place. When things get too intense, respond by visualizing your safe place. It can be a real place or imagined place—what's important is that you feel safe there.

Talking about it is another way to deal with it. Give voice to your pain. Give sorrow words.

Ultimately, you have to find what works for you. But know that eventually something will work!