

## Key Points

Dissociation is nature's trick to make the unbearable bearable. It is normal and designed to help you cope with trauma and abuse. It is the ability to numb out and reduce your awareness of terrible events and feelings, to take you out of the present.

It is a survival trick at the time of abuse and trauma. However, if dissociation carries on numbing you out and switching you off once the danger has passed this can cause problems:

- Memories can become jumbled and patchy
- You may find yourself dissociated if under any kind of stress
- It can make day to day life difficult if you are 'switched off' and not getting information (particularly if this related to your safety)
- You may 'lose' time and memories
- Can be disruptive to life (find yourself places)

Flashbacks and nightmares can be absolutely terrifying as things you are trying to avoid are replayed as if happening again (often with all the feelings, smells and sounds).

At the time it feels as if you are in the event and not in the present. Experts think this is our brains attempt to make sense of terrible things that we are avoiding. It is like the junk in the cupboard that keeps falling out.

Dissociation is about taking our awareness away from bad things, flashbacks and nightmares is about taking us back to things we would rather avoid. They are like 2 sides of a coin.

### Coping with Flashbacks, Nightmares and Dissociation

As ever, this is about a starting point, things that you can do to help yourself. Many people will need additional specialist support. Evidence tells us the most effective treatment for flashbacks and nightmares is stage 2 of treatment (talking about the events that bother you).

However, there is a lot you can do at stage 1 (which is where we are at now):

- Keep a diary of what is happening, what triggers it, what do you do when it happens.
- Remind yourself that you are safe (assuming you are). You will reduce the need to dissociate if you believe the present moment is safe.
- Remind yourself that the event is over (assuming that it is). If you find yourself feeling like you are back in the event, this is a flashback or nightmare, it is horrible but it is not unsafe.
- Practice mindfulness. We have learned a few mindfulness techniques in the course. Mindfulness keeps our attention on the present, on what is happening here and now. This is the opposite of dissociation (switches off the present) and flashbacks/nightmares (takes you back to bad events)

- Grounding. This is similar to mindfulness in that it is designed to keep you in the present. Examples that some people find useful:
  - ▶ Remind yourself of the date and time.
  - ▶ Remind yourself that you are safe.
  - ▶ Stamp/press your feet into the floor, concentrate on the feeling that gives you.
  - ▶ Concentrate on the details of the things around you, use all your senses
- ▶ Picture a big red STOP sign
- ▶ Slowly breath, pay attention to doing this
- ▶ Go outside, feel the temperature, the air moving, notice what is around you
- ▶ Focus on the conversation someone is having with you/ what is being said on the TV
- ▶ Remember you are safe

### Managing Dissociation, Flashbacks and Nightmares Diary

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
What happened?							
What was happening before?							
What I did?							

**What I understand about this week:**

**What I am going to try:**

**Preparation, Practice, Patience.**