

CONTROLLING PANIC AND SUDDEN DISTRESS

Starting to remember and deal with your abuse can lead to distressing feelings. These include:

- **High anxiety and panic.**
- **Sudden memories of the abuse forcing their way into your thoughts.**
- **Flashbacks, in which you seem to relive the abuse.**
- **Suddenly feeling that you're a child again, feeling as you did at the age you were abused.**
- **Suddenly seeing, hearing, sensing or feeling something/someone which/who isn't actually present.**

These distressing experiences may recur throughout your recovery, but they can be a particular feature of crisis. When you experience them you can feel out of control. They appear to come out of the blue – but usually there is something which has triggered them. A trigger can be anything that reminds you of the abuse, for instance:

- **Sex.**
- **Becoming a parent reminding you of your own childhood.**
- **Having a child that reaches the same age as you when you were abused.**
- **A sight, smell, sound or touch that reminds you of the abuse.**
- **Anything that reminds you of the abuser.**
- **Seeing something on the TV or in the newspapers about sexual abuse.**
- **Medical procedures and examinations which involve people touching you or seeming to have control over your body.**
- **Any contact you still have with the abuser.**
- **Any relationship which involves someone seeming to have more power than you, e.g., work or therapy.**
- **Anniversaries, such as the death of the abuser.**
- **If you get assaulted or abused again.**

In the early stages of remembering the abuse these triggers and the resulting distress can be the main feature of the crisis.

Sexual abuse is a terrifying experience. As a child you may have felt bewildered, powerless and completely alone. If you had to hide your feelings it

would have been hard to go on, feeling scared and without support. But hidden feelings don't just disappear. As you get older triggers remind you of the abuse and the pain breaks through into awareness. This explains experiences of panic, flashbacks and sudden, distressing sensations and memories.

Self help for Panic and Sudden Distress

- **Make sure you have someone you can talk to. Friends, a counsellor, or a support group. Sharing your feelings helps to reduce panic and distress over time.**
- **Try not to fight against it. You may just get more tense. Whilst it's unpleasant, panic and distress are part of recovery and tend to get less over time.**
- **Try to avoid situations of overwhelming anxiety, e.g. contact with your abuser, or major life changes. It's not always possible. In a crisis it's important not to put yourself through more terror than you have to. Dealing with the unpredictable memories is hard enough without adding more stress**
- **Avoid alcohol and non-prescribed drugs. Whilst they will calm you down they could lead to more problems, like addiction.**
- **Avoid quick decisions. It isn't possible to think straight when you're in distress. Wait until you've calmed down.**
- **Avoid driving until you've calmed down.**
- **Don't hurt yourself or anyone else.**
- **Avoid caffeine. It's a stimulant and may make you feel more hyped up.**
- **Develop a plan with your GP about how you will use prescribed medication to help. It can be useful in the short-term, but carries dangers of addiction. It's not the long-term answer to dealing with abuse.**
- **Try to become aware as early as you can that you're experiencing a panic attack/flashback/sudden memory/strange sensation. Stop whatever it is you are doing.**
- **Calm yourself. Breathe slowly and deeply.**
- **Check out reality. You could say your name, your age, the date, and the place you are at now. Plant your feet firmly on the ground and hang onto something – like the arms of a chair. Anything to get the message that the abuse is not happening now.**
- **Decide what to do next. You could:**
 - **leave the situation causing the trigger.**

- change the situation causing the trigger
- continue what you're doing slowly, breathing deeply, reassuring yourself, and trying to relax.
- accept what is happening and experience the feelings.
- **Afterwards try to work out what happened. What was the trigger? How did you feel? Did you learn anything new about your abuse? Share this information with a member of your Support team as soon as you can.**
- **Expect to feel vulnerable afterwards. You have had a scary experience. Get what support and comfort you need.**
- **Remember that all of this is part of recovery. Many Survivors have had these experiences, got through them and got control. It does not mean you are going crazy.**

We can take a more detailed look at each area, adding further tips to the ideas above.

Panic Attacks

Panic is a feeling of extreme anxiety. When you are having a panic attack your body may seem to be out of control:

- **Breathing becomes fast, like you can't catch your breath.**
- **You get sweaty hands, or you sweat all over.**
- **Your heart feels like it is racing.**
- **You may get a hot flush.**

You may start to think:

- **I am going to die.**
- **I am going to have a heart attack.**
- **I am going to collapse.**
- **I am going to make a fool of myself.**
- **I am not safe.**
- **Something terrible is going to happen.**
- **I am going crazy.**

In panic fast breathing and adrenaline cause a number of unusual physical sensations. It is a bit like the feeling when you go for a job interview or sit your

driving test only your panic attacks are more likely to be caused by memories of your abuse than anything occurring in the present.

You may try to get away from the situation you are in. Of course, if something really is happening to you which is frightening – such as finding yourself in a dangerous area late at night – then it is right to feel scared and try and get away. But panic also occurs when nothing dangerous is happening.

Panic attacks are hard to get rid of completely, partly because there are so many possible triggers. But you can learn to get through them safely.

Here are some tips:

- **Breathe slowly and deeply. This is especially important in panic. Fast, shallow breathing causes a lot of the unpleasant sensations.**
- **Try to control your thoughts. They can get out of hand in panic. Think up something reassuring you can say to yourself if you feel a panic coming on. Some ideas are:**
 - I am safe.
 - This will soon pass.
 - This is a panic attack. There is nothing physically wrong with me.
- **Sometimes doing something can jolt you out of the panic. This can be anything from washing the dishes to listening to music. Experiment for yourself and see if anything works. Anything is OK as long as it doesn't involve you hurting yourself or anyone else.**
- **If you panic in a public space – providing you are not in real danger – try not to run away. Breathe, reassure yourself, and ride out the feeling. If you escape from the situation it can be hard to go back later.**

Sudden Memories

Sometimes memories of your abuse can pop into your head all of a sudden. There's normally always a trigger. Often the trigger is sex or touch. You might get pictures in your head of what happened to you. People or things in the picture might seem frozen in time. Usually, you are aware it's a memory. It is still scary, but you can know that it is not something that is happening to you now.

(Consider the advice under 'Self help for Panic and Sudden Distress.')

In addition:

- **If you don't want to experience the memory now, you could try saying STOP to yourself very firmly. That may cut into the way the trigger**

causes the memory. This may not work because the memories happen quickly. Also, it may not always be advisable to stop the memory. Though distressing, they are part of recovery and dealing with the abuse.

- **Afterwards try to write about the memory. If you don't want to write you could draw a picture representing it, or mould something from plasticine. Try to share this with someone from your Support team, memories demand to be heard. The more they are heard, the more likely they are to get less over time.**
- **Memories may be connected in your mind to feelings of shame and blame about the abuse. This is why it is so important to share them with a trusted member of your Support team. This breaks the secrecy and gets you support from someone who sees the truth that you were not to blame and fault for the abuse lies with the abuser.**
- **Sudden memories can leave you shaky and scared, Always try to balance out the experience by looking after yourself afterwards, and by giving yourself special treats. You've had to experience pain. You should also have some pleasure.**

Flashbacks

A flashback is a sudden memory of abuse that is so strong it actually seems that it is happening now. Something usually triggers the flashback and it is often touch or sex.

Again you can get pictures in your head. But they seem much more real. You may experience the actual sounds, smells, tastes, emotions that you did at the time of the abuse. You may feel terrified, shocked, numb, in a rage or filled with disgust – depending on what you felt then. You may get the same physical sensations in your body. These sensations are sometimes in your genitals or bottom. It is like you are back being abused again as a child.

It all seems so real it is hard to keep track of what is actually happening in the real world. You may feel completely out of control.

Flashbacks are very scary. But you can get through them and get some control. Some Survivors have later described them as a way of retrieving useful information about the abuse they suffered as a child.

Consider advice under 'Self help for panic and sudden distress' and the additional advice on 'Coping with sudden memories.' Also:

- **Develop a good idea about what triggers cause you to flashback. You won't be able to avoid them all. It probably wouldn't be good to anyway as they are part of recovery and something you may not want**

to avoid, as they are part of your everyday life or very enjoyable – like making love. But there may be some that you can avoid. Decide which triggers you will avoid. This will give you some control over the amount of flashbacks and distress you experience.

Coping with panic, memories and sudden distress is very hard and there are no easy answers. But many Survivors have experienced them, come through them, and established some control. Over time and with support they have seen this distress reduce. As a child you actually survived the abuse. Then you may have been all on your own. Now, as an adult you can get support and survive the memories of abuse too.