***Triggers***

*A trigger is something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma.*

**Triggers are very personal; different things trigger different people.  The survivor may begin to avoid situations and stimuli that she/he thinks triggered the flashback.  She/he will react to this flashback, trigger with an emotional intensity similar to that at the time of the trauma. A person's triggers are activated through one or more of the  five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.**

**The senses identified as being the most common to trigger someone are sight and sound, followed by touch and smell, and taste close behind.  A combination of the senses is identified as well, especially in situations that strongly resemble the original trauma.  Although triggers are varied and diverse, there are often common themes.**

***Sight***

* **Often someone who resembles the abuser or who has similar traits or objects (ie. clothing, hair color, distinctive walk).**
* **Any situation where someone else is being abused (ie. anything from a raised eyebrow and verbal comment to actual physical abuse).**
* **The object that was used to abuse**
* **The objects that are associated with or were common in the household where the abuse took place (ie. alcohol, piece of furniture, time of year).**
* **Any place or situation where the abuse took place (ie. specific locations in a house, holidays, family events, social settings).**

***Sound***

* **Anything that sounds like anger (ie. raised voices, arguments, bangs and thumps, something breaking).**
* **Anything that sounds like pain or fear (ie. crying, whispering, screaming).**
* **Anything that might have been in the place or situation prior to, during, or after the abuse or reminds her/him of the abuse (ie. sirens, foghorns, music, cricket, chirping, car door closing).**
* **Anything that resembles sounds that the abuser made (ie. whistling, footsteps, pop of can opening, tone of voice).**
* **Words of abuse (ie. cursing, labels, put-downs, specific words used).**

***Smell***

* **Anything that resembles the smell of the abuser (ie. tobacco, alcohol, drugs, after shave, perfume).**
* **Any smells that resemble the place or situation where the abuse occurred (ie. food cooking ,wood, odors, alcohol).**

***Touch***

* **Anything that resembles the abuse or things that occurred prior to or after the abuse (ie. certain physical touch, someone standing too close, petting an animal, the way someone approaches you).**

***Taste***

* **Anything that is related to the abuse, prior to the abuse or after the abuse (ie. certain foods, alcohol, tobacco).**

***Flashbacks***

Flashbacks are memories of past traumas.  They may take the form of pictures, sounds, smells, body sensations, feelings, or the lack of them (numbness).

**Many times there is no actual visual or auditory memory with flashbacks.  One may have a sense of panic, of being trapped, or a feeling of powerlessness with no memory stimulating it.  These experiences can also happen in dreams.**

**During the initial crisis, the survivor had to insulate her/himself from the emotional and physical horrors of the trauma.  In order to survive, that insulated part of the self remained isolated, unable to express the feelings and thoughts of that time.  It is as though the survivor put that part of her/his self into a time capsule, which later surfaces and comes out as a flashback, feeling just as intense in the present as it did during the crisis.**

**When that part comes out, the survivor is experiencing the past as if it were happening today. The intense feelings and body sensations occurring are frightening because the feelings/sensations are not related to the reality of the present and many times seem to come from nowhere.**

**The survivor may begin to think she/he is crazy and is afraid of telling anyone of these experiences.  The survivor may feel out of control and at the mercy of her/his experiences.**

**Flashbacks are unsettling and may feel overwhelming because the survivor becomes so caught up in the trauma that she/he forgets about the safety and security of the present moment.**

***What Helps - Tips for Survivors***

**1. Tell yourself that you are having a flashback**

**2. Remind yourself that the worst is over.  The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are memories of the past.  The actual event has already occurred and you survived. Now it is the time to let out the terror, rage, hurt, and/or panic.  Now is the time to honor your experience.**

**3. Get grounded.  This means stamping your feet on the ground to remind yourself that you have feet and can get away now if you need to.  (There may have been times before when you could not get away, now you can.)  Being aware of all five senses can also help you ground yourself.**

**4. Breathe.  When we get scared we stop normal breathing.  As a result our body begins to panic from the lack of oxygen.  Lack of oxygen in itself causes a great deal of panic feelings; pounding in the head, tightness, sweating, feeling faint, shakiness, and dizziness.  When we breathe deeply enough, a lot of the panic feeling can decrease.  Breathing deeply means putting your hand on your diaphragm, pushing against your hand, and then exhaling so the diaphragm goes in.**

**5. Reorient to the present.  Begin to use your five senses in the present.  Look around and see the colors in the room, the shapes of things, the people near, etc.  Listen to the sounds in the room:  your breathing, traffic, birds, people, cars, etc.  Feel your body and what is touching it: your clothes, your own arms and hands, the chair, or the floor supporting you.**

**6. Get in touch with your need for boundaries.  Sometimes when we are having a flashback we lose the sense of where we leave off and the world begins; as if we do not have skin.  Wrap yourself in a blanket, hold a pillow or stuffed animal, go to bed, sit in a closet, any way that you can feel yourself truly protected from the outside.**

**7. Get support.  Depending on your situation you may need to be alone or may want someone near you.  In either case it is important that your close ones know about flashbacks so they can help with the process, whether that means letting you be by yourself or being there.**

**8. Take the time to recover.  Sometimes flashbacks are very powerful. Give yourself time to make the transition form this powerful experience. Don't expect yourself to jump into adult activities right away.  Take a nap, a warm bath, or some quiet time.  Be kind and gentle with yourself.  Do not beat yourself up for having a flashback.**

**9. Honor your experience.  Appreciate yourself for having survived that horrible time.  Respect your body's need to experience a full range of feelings.**

**10. Be patient.  It takes time to heal the past.  It takes time to learn appropriate ways of taking care of yourself, of being an adult who has feelings, and developing effective ways of coping in the here and now.**

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