

Finding Refuge: Helping Those Who Re-Experience Traumatic Memories



by DARBY STRICKLAND

Caring for counselees who have suffered trauma is delicate work. In the aftermath of unbearable events, sufferers have many struggles that they do not always reveal at the outset of helping relationships. It was a few months into counseling before Jason revealed to me that most mornings as he gets ready for the day, he sees flashes of images and sometimes hears noises.¹ He feels his heart racing and becomes disoriented; he no longer knows where he is. He was very restless as he told me this and did not look at me, yet I knew I had to press in and ask him to tell me more about what he was experiencing. He replied, “I see rising floodwaters swirling around me, and flashes of the cars floating and bobbing up and down. Sometimes I hear people trapped inside, screaming.”

Jason served on a search and rescue team after a devastating hurricane hit his community. He and his team saved many people, but several were swept away by the speed of the rising waters. He remembers their faces as he stands in the shower, and it drags him back to that frightful day. As the memories overcome him, he feels like he is there all over

1. To maintain confidentiality, Jason is not one person and the details of his story have been adapted.

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again. It makes sense that the shower water simulates the pounding rain of the hurricane and activates his horrible memories. They quickly overtake him like the floodwaters that overwhelmed his community that day. During the last heavy rainstorm, Jason was afraid to go to work because he feared having a flashback and being disoriented around people who might notice.

This level of distress is hard to bear and intrudes on daily living, and, though frequent, each episode feels surprising and disorienting. As a counselor who has never experienced such a vivid, all-encompassing sensory event, it was difficult to imagine what it might be like for someone else. Like most people, I have some bad memories, but my mind and body have never re-experienced a trauma as if it was

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happening in the present. Jason's experience was visceral and was much more than a bad memory. But since other first responders in his unit did not talk about having this struggle, he felt isolated and alone. He was relieved to finally be talking about what he was going through, but he was afraid that the episodes would get worse if he did.

This article will focus on how to help sufferers like Jason. It is vital for helpers to understand the terror and utter disorientation that people endure when they re-experience their traumatic memories. The disorientation creates anxiety that it will happen again, and many, like Jason, also feel shame because they cannot make the occurrences stop. We will begin by offering some definitions. Next, we will consider God's heart for sufferers by exploring Psalm 46. Then, because many readers are not familiar with re-experiencing trauma, we will look at how the memories that generate these intrusive episodes are formed and activated and the different ways they manifest. Finally, we will explore practical and spiritual ways to help these sufferers move forward.

A Definition of Re-Experiencing Trauma

Jason's traumatic memories are intruding into his life. He is not just remembering his trauma—he is re-experiencing it. This is different from

typical memories, even bad ones, because he does not just recall the event—he relives it. These intrusions are experienced at a multisensory level so they feel real, like they are happening in the present moment, causing Jason to re-experience his trauma and often dissociate.

Definition. Historically, there was no formal definition for re-experiencing past traumas. Recently, however, the *International Classification of Diseases*, 11th revision (*ICD-11*), and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 5th edition (*DSM-5*), settled on a definition as part of their description of PTSD.² It allows for a broad spectrum of variations. Here is the definition as it appears in the *ICD-11*:

[An essential feature of PTSD is] re-experiencing the traumatic event in the present, in which the event(s) is not just remembered but is experienced as occurring again in the here and now. This typically occurs in the form of vivid intrusive memories or images; flashbacks, which can vary from mild (there is a transient sense of the event occurring again in the present) to severe (there is a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings), or repetitive dreams or nightmares that are thematically related to the traumatic event(s). Re-experiencing is typically accompanied by strong or overwhelming emotions, such as fear or horror, and strong physical sensations.³

The *ICD-11* goes on to say that the same emotions felt during the trauma may recur but that simply remembering the event or the feelings from the event is *not* sufficient to be considered re-experiencing.

More than flashbacks. Many of us would use the word *flashback* for what is described above. However, flashbacks are primarily visual, perhaps a quick memory that we “see.” But that use of the term lacks the other aspects of re-experiencing trauma (e.g., emotional, physical), so it is not inclusive enough. Re-experiencing trauma is more than having flashbacks.

2. The *ICD-11* is published by the World Health Organization and the *DSM-5* is published by the American Psychiatric Association.

3. “6B40 Post traumatic stress disorder,” *ICD-11 for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics*, World Health Organization, accessed November 14, 2024, <https://icd.who.int/browse/2024-01/mms/en#2070699808>.

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