

COPING WITH NIGHTMARES AND FLASHBACKS POST-BURN

“You wake up suddenly from a sound sleep, your heart is pounding and you feel sweaty. The smell of smoke is in your nostrils and the anxiety is almost overwhelming. Your eyes adjust to the light and you realize you are in your hospital room or bedroom at home. You wonder how long it will be until these unpleasant thoughts and feelings go away. Will they ever go away? Am I going crazy? What should I do? Should I tell someone?”

If the previous scenario is at all familiar to you, know that you are not alone and that these feelings are normal. Know, too, that there are some things you can do to make your life a little more bearable until these anxieties settle down.

Nightmares, daymares and flashbacks are very common for people who have been through a very unpleasant and life-threatening experience, such as a burn injury. It is not unusual to have vivid memories of the accident for weeks and, perhaps, months. The good news is that this is a natural process and the vast majority of burn survivors go on to lead very happy lives and no longer have nightmares or flashbacks. Time can heal.

So why do you experience nightmares or flashbacks post-burn? It is believed that, just as your physical body needs to recover from the burn injury, so too does your mind. The nightmare may be your mind’s attempt to (a) find meaning or an explanation for the injury and b) work through acceptance of the losses experienced after the burn. It is a way people adjust to what has happened to them. These reactions are normal, but can certainly be unpleasant.

A flashback is a re-experience of the event, such as the burn and can include feelings of anxiety and terror. Thoughts may be repetitious or come right out of the blue. Memories may be prompted by visits from family, friends or co-workers asking to talk about the accident. The thoughts may be very vivid, including sights, sounds and smells. It may feel as if the event is happening all over again. A television news report, sounds of a fire engine or ambulance, awaking from surgery, recovering from a major dressing change or waking up from sleep can all serve as prompts for reliving the accident. Some patients experience the flashback/ nightmare/daymare during their stay in the burn unit while others are fine until they get home.

It seems to be more disturbing for patients to have a delayed reaction because they believe they should be feel-

ing better now they are at home. Some patients have admitted to me that they were worried they were going crazy, that no one else had these feelings so long after the accident.

If you consider that the burn accident sets off a crisis, a state of extreme emotional upset in a person’s life, then it would not be unusual to acknowledge that life may not be “business as usual” for a time. You shouldn’t feel you have to pretend that everything is normal, because it is probably anything but, at least for a while.

Many survivors of horrible accidents talk about feeling a loss of control over their lives. Burn survivors also have to adjust to a loss of physical appearance (short-term and long-term), loss of fingers or toes, arms or legs, loss of family members, pets, cherished objects, a family home. Life in the burn centre is regimented, no matter how patient-centred staff try to be. There are schedules for dressing changes, medications and surgeries. One’s family and work life is unexpectedly and profoundly interrupted. These losses are not small and need to be acknowledged, grieved over and attempts made to come up with a plan on how to manage over the next few days, weeks and months. It is not unusual to have an occasional setback, however, Mary Ellen Ton in her book “The Flames Shall Not Consume You” (1982, David C. Cook Publishers) speaks of such an event upon her return home following weeks in a hospital burn unit: “I strained to get my right arm up over my head and began to clumsily scoop at the object. I could see not it wasn’t the Frisbee, but, with my curiosity aroused, I was still determined to bring it down. Finally it fell. I caught it in my arms, clutching it to my chest.

The smell sent me reeling backwards. I caught my balance by backing into the front end of the car, at the same time dropping the objects I had worked so hard to get.

The purse and gloves lying on the concrete floor at my feet were charred and still reeking of smoke. The sight and smell of them sent me whirling back in time to that room.

The shock of suddenly coming upon the purse and gloves I had carried to work on that day knocked the breath out of me. I stooped to pick them up. ‘No... oh no...’ I cried. ‘It’s over, it over. I’m all right’. But the instant replay had already started. No matter how tightly I shut my eyes, I saw it all again; the smoke, black and ominous, swirling in the hall; the woman slumped on the floor and then hanging onto the window ledge.

All the pictures I had tried to shut out of my mind danced in front of the windows of my soul. And the picture were not without sound effects. I could hear the woman scream-

ing, ‘Help, help, somebody help me’...

Huge sobs racked my body as I bent to retrieve the purse and gloves. I held them close to me and rocked back and forth. ‘Poor things,’ I thought, ‘they’re just like me, burned, scorched and scarred, no longer fit for anything but the trash can.’

Ceremoniously, I lifted the lid off the garbage can, standing just inside the door of the garage and dropped the articles one at a time into the dark recesses of the plastic liner. There was so much I had to part with; pictures, remnants from the fire, and large pieces of myself. Somehow I knew, as I heard each article hit the bottom of the can, a part of myself was going too. As I turned my back on the can and walked across the garage and into the kitchen, I took my first faltering steps out of the fire.

I never really thought about it, but perhaps that June was a little like walking in on the middle of a movie. I couldn’t really understand what was happening to me or conceive how it might all end without seeing the beginning. Maybe because the shock of the fire was so great. I cannot consciously remember how I managed to climb out the small window. I needed to go back in my mind and think myself out of that room. I don’t pretend to understand how the mind works. I only know my journey back into that room seemed to allow me to walk out of it.”

(P.125 - 127 reprinted without permission and I ask forgiveness of the author. I make frequent reference to her work because of its eloquence and wisdom).

You may be wondering what you can do to help yourself or your loved one through these tough times. Karl Slaikeu (1987) identifies the concept of “psychological first aid”, where a person experiencing a personal crisis needs to find a way to decide what must be done now. The remaining energies can then be focussed on getting better first from the physical point of view, living “one day at a time”, which has become a “mantra” in most burn centres around the world.

With the focus of survival as your primary goal at first, Slaikeu recommends two things:

a) allow yourself to feel bad - a crisis is a time when everything is abnormal. Don’t pretend everything is business as usual.

b) protect yourself against fatal moves - immobilizing thoughts such as “I can’t go on, I can’t handle this. Nothing I do will make a difference”. These negative thoughts generally change and hope surfaces out of hopelessness as you realize there is life after a burn injury. Know these feelings are not uncommon and share your thoughts with a trusted family member, friend or member of the burn team. There are people who can help you through these dark and fearful times.

The following empowering thoughts can assist in the second area of focus, that of fighting back.

They include:

Even though I may have no control over what happened, I do have control over how I will react to it.

I will take small steps toward healing.

This too shall pass.

Since I have no idea what my new life will be like, it could well be better than I ever imagined.

I will live in the present.

Finally, Slaikeu recommends the following plan in order to avoid the all too common pitfall of trying to solve everything at once. He advises breaking the overall plan into manageable tasks and asking for help every step along the way. I find that family and friends are grateful to be a part of the process as the burn survivor faces the challenges of full recovery one day at a time.

1. Make a list of all the things you are thinking about - concerns, worries, frustrations.
2. Identify your top priorities.
3. Plan your best move - keep in mind small steps, not sweeping changes.
4. Use your family and friends as resources. They are a burn survivor’s single most important external support. They generally want to help, but may not be certain how best to do so. Call on them, lean on them.

An article, such as this, cannot offer advice that is meaningful to each burn survivor and every situation. I hope that I have communicated three things: that these nightmares and flashbacks are normal, that they do go away in time, and that there are certain things you can do to help yourself through them. Lastly, please talk with someone you trust about your feelings. It can be helpful to acknowledge the fears and take that first step toward overcoming them. There are simple breathing and relaxation exercises to help with the anxiety. In some situations, a short course of anti-anxiety medication can be very helpful if the feelings become over-whelming or prevent you from getting much-needed sleep. Please do not hesitate to discuss your feelings with your family or any member of the burn team. We are here to help at any step along your journey to full recovery!