

# Dissociation

## What is dissociation?

Dissociation is a term that is used to describe the common experience of 'shutting off' and losing awareness of what is happening around you. A familiar example is when people are driving in a car and realise they have not remembered the past few miles of the journey because they were on 'auto pilot'. Day dreaming is also another common dissociative experience. Everyone will experience periods of dissociation in day to day life. It is estimated that about 5% of the population will experience more intense periods of dissociation that lead them to lose contact with reality for longer periods of time, often for several hours. For these people, they may not be able to remember where they have been or what they have done.

Research has shown that periods of dissociation are more common in people who have faced difficult life events such as early childhood trauma. They may also have other mental health difficulties as a result of these traumatic experiences.

There are different kinds of dissociation. These include:

**Depersonalisation** – This is when someone feels numb or shut off from yourself and your feelings; feeling 'cut off from your body' or as if you are in a movie or on autopilot.

**Derealisation** - is when things don't appear as they might normally do. The world around you might seem unreal; people may look like robots; objects may change in size or colour; the world may seem distant as if it was at the end of a tunnel, behind a glass screen or in a dream.

There is growing research evidence that hearing voices is also a dissociative experience. Voices may often take on the feelings and thoughts that we have shut out of our awareness in order to cope. For example, if you are angry but do not allow yourself to have this feeling, then the voices may tell you that you want to hurt others or yourself. Voices can also be understood as memories of abuse that we have not yet processed and dealt with - for example the voices may take on the role of the abusers. There is more information on this in the hearing voices section of the website.

A few people with very complex trauma histories find that their voices actually turn into several different identities which are sometimes called 'parts' or 'alters'. Each identity may have a particular way of thinking and interacting with the world which can feel very surreal to experience. In a small proportion of people, one identity may have no awareness of what happens when another identity is in control. This does not mean that you have 'schizophrenia'. It simply means that your experiences were so traumatic that you had to separate out parts of your mind and keep different memories and feelings in different places. Sometimes these parts can take on their own characteristics – such as how their voice sounds, what they say, what gender or age they are, and so on.

## So why do we dissociate?

Dissociation is a natural way for our minds and bodies to cope with and protect us from difficult experiences and feelings. This includes the effects of complex trauma. If you think about it, it's a really protective psychological defence. At the time, traumatic events can be too overwhelming for

our mind to process. The brain then protects us by shutting off from what is happening or what we are feeling and remembering.

Feelings of derealisation are also a side-effect of some street drugs and psychiatric medications, and it may be worth checking if this is a factor in your situation.

### **Why can dissociation be a problem?**

Although dissociation may be helpful at the time of a trauma, in the long term it stops us from being able to process the trauma and learn more helpful ways of dealing with it. People may also feel shut off from more positive feelings such as happiness and love. Dissociating can make people more vulnerable as they are not able to protect themselves. Continuing and repeated episodes of dissociation may interfere with your work, school, social, or home life. You may be someone who appears to be functioning well, but it may feel very different from the inside. That is why we may need to learn to use more helpful coping strategies instead. This is especially important if we want to talk about and start to process some of our trauma memories.

### **How do I know if I dissociate?**

People who dissociate have describe feeling spaced out, numb or cut off. An example of this may be when someone is thinking about an event that was tremendously upsetting yet have no feelings about it.

Some other examples of dissociation include:

- Finding time passing without noticing.
- Having periods of time that feel unreal or dreamlike or that they are leaving their body.
- Talking to someone and not being able to remember what they said.
- For some, they might find things in their possessions that they do not remember getting,
- They may find writing that they do not recognize having done,
- being called an unknown name by strangers who act in a familiar manner towards them but they have no recollection of meeting,
- or being confronted about their supposed actions that they cannot remember.
- Sometimes, in severe cases, a person may find themselves in a different location with no explanation of how they got there.
- Or they might experience flashbacks of traumatic events

As described above, all of us have these experiences at times, but if you recognise a lot of them, dissociation may be a problem for you. Some people are relieved to find that there is a diagnosis and an understandable way of understanding their experiences.

### **What can help?**

Becoming aware of how you are feeling, and developing different ways to cope, are the key to managing dissociation. This website includes a number of alternative coping strategies such as

- Grounding, breathing exercises ,
- self-soothing
- Mindfulness (see the sections on these topics.)

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- Keeping a journal or diary, using a watch, identifying triggers to dissociation and so on, can all be helpful in keeping you grounded in the present moment.