

Understanding Dissociation

Dissociation, to put it simply, means detachment. Psychologically speaking, it refers to a detachment from physical sensations (e.g., blocking out pain or cold), emotions (e.g., feeling numb or not recognizing emotions), reality (e.g., not knowing where you are when you're at home or feeling that your body isn't your own), or memories (e.g., not feeling like your memories or past belong to you). Dissociation is considered by many to be a survival mechanism that acts as a block to things that might otherwise overload the brain and nervous system. When it comes to fight or flight, dissociation is the freeze response. It's the **hypoarousal** state rather than the **hyperarousal** state.

In a way, dissociation is a state between sleep and awareness. It can make you feel unalert or 'foggy.' Experiencing dissociation can be like looking through a veil and having your emotions numbed. You may find your vision blurring around the edges, and emotions may be hard to access or be seen for what they are. You may feel like something is wrong and feel distanced from your surroundings or other people. Time may not seem linear and you may find yourself unable to concentrate. You may feel like you're floating above your body or may have an out of body experience. On the other hand, you may feel like you're retreating into your own mind.

Dissociation runs along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are things such as daydreaming or blocking out pain. At the other end can be experiences such as time loss, loss of memory for significant events in your life, confusion about your identity, feeling as though you are different people at different times.

Dissociation is a state. It's a protective mechanism called up by the nervous system when it reaches its maximum capacity to process stimulation (both internally and externally).

Dissociation caps the keyed up and restless energy underneath. It numbs the body so that one feels less internal distress. It's a good temporary back up plan devised by nature for coping when we feel overwhelmed. But it has its drawbacks.

Dissociation refers to a continuum of experiences where you feel disconnected to what is going on around you. These can range from driving in a car and realising you can't remember anything about the journey, or watching a TV programme and not hearing what someone says to you, to experiences which interfere with your daily life such as memory gaps for long periods of time, being aware of your actions but at the same time its as though you are watching yourself performing them, or at times being able to ignore pain. People who dissociate a lot can be good at 'shutting out' certain things but at other times can feel so engulfed by memories that they are unaware of the present.

Different parts of ourselves:

As we grow up each of us develops typical and lasting ways of thinking, feeling, acting and perceiving that go to make up our personality. Personality is a shorthand term to describe our unique pattern of characteristic responses. We have different patterns of responses to different types of situation - we sometimes talk about ourselves as having different parts. Usually, people change smoothly between their response patterns to suit different situations, like changing gears in a car. They can go from home to work and think, feel and act in different ways and yet still experience themselves as the same person. Dissociation prevents this from happening in a smooth

way. While one part of you may remember and 'own' a certain experience, another part may not.

Problematic dissociation can occur as a result of trauma that is too difficult for a child to cope with, take in and integrate into their sense of the world. It is as though certain events get stored inside different parts of us, so that we are able to go on with normal life as much as possible and keep these memories locked away and out of awareness.

It's important to remember that dissociative parts of the personality are not separate identities within the same body, but rather parts of a single individual that are not yet functioning in a smooth, coordinated and flexible way.

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