

Understanding and coping with Dissociation

Dissociation describes the experience of losing awareness of what is happening around or inside us. We are all likely to dissociate to some extent. This can include daydreaming and being on autopilot, for example arriving at our destination without being able to recall the details of travelling there. Many people may experience dissociation to different degrees.

What does dissociation feel like?

- Losing periods of time without noticing
- Feeling spaced out and not connected to yourself or your surroundings
- Feeling that the world and other people seem different or not real
- Feeling numb or cut off
- Feeling outside of your body or that you don't feel real
- Hearing voices
- Feeling that there are different parts of yourself

Why do people dissociate?

Dissociation is a natural way that we switch off to cope with experiencing overwhelming stress, such as during a traumatic event. At the time events may be too much for our brains to process. Dissociation protects us by shutting down awareness of what is happening or what we are feeling and thinking. Experiences of dissociation can last for a relatively short time (hours or days) or for much longer (weeks or months). If you dissociate for a long time, especially when you are young, dissociation may become the main way you deal with stress as an adult. This may lead to difficulties and can get in the way of everyday life and maintaining relationships.

What can help?

Being able to notice how you are feeling and developing different ways to cope is key to managing dissociation and becoming more connected. Many people find that having an understanding of dissociation and what your triggers might be can be helpful as a first step. Grounding techniques can help gain some distance from thoughts, feelings and memories by bringing people back into the present moment and what is happening around us. Here are some ideas below:

- Breathe slowly
- Smell something strong
- Talk to someone
- Hold an ice cube
- Say aloud one thing you can see, one thing you can hear, see and feel
- Notice your environment
- Write in a journal
- Grounding objects – keep an object with you that you can hold. It may be something of positive emotional significance
- Eat something. Strongly tasting or crunchy food may help orientate you
- Go for a walk barefoot outside. Press your feet into the ground

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Further reading and resources:

MIND have a useful information leaflet on Understanding Dissociative Disorders (2019) which you can access on their website at www.mind.org.uk

The following books have more information on understanding dissociation and trauma and what might help:

- Boon, S., Steele, K., and Van der Har, O., (2011); *Coping with Trauma Related Dissociation*. New York: Norton
- Haines, S. (2016). *Trauma is really strange*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Fisher, J., (2017) *Healing the fragmented selves of trauma survivors*. New York: Routledge