

Dissociation

What is dissociation?

Dissociation is a mental process that leaves a person feeling disconnected from their thoughts, feelings, memories, or sense of identity. It is the mind's ability to conceal a thought, feeling, body sensation, or memory for a period of time. The mind can quickly slip into this state when it feels that what is happening is too much to handle.

Why does dissociation happen?

Dissociation can occur as a result of trauma or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It can occur during a traumatic event or experience as a way for the mind to mentally escape when it is not possible to physically escape (the *freeze* response). It can also occur as an on-going symptom afterward, as a reaction to triggers. It may continue to happen because the feelings associated with the trigger are too big for the unconscious mind to process through.

What happens during dissociation?

Signs and symptoms of dissociation may include:

- Frequent blank spells or zoning out; losing track of time; significant memory lapses
- Feeling disconnected from self or the environment around you; out-of-body experiences
- Feeling as if the world is distorted or unreal
- Sudden and unexpected shifts in mood; depression and anxiety
- Feeling as if a painful event from the past is happening now (flashback)
- Identity confusion; behaving in a way that is out of character; feeling compelled to behave in a certain way

What dissociation might look like to others:

- Daydreaming, "spacing out", or glazed eyes
- Behaviour that is out of character for the individual
- A sudden switch in mood, emotion, or reaction to an event

Do you think you have dissociated before? Describe what it felt like for you. _____

What can you do to control dissociation?

You may not realize that you are dissociating, so the first step in learning to control it is to learn to recognize it. Journal about the impacts of your triggers to observe patterns, and talk to a counsellor if you have any of the symptoms listed above.

Grounding is the most recommended way to cope with dissociation that is triggered after trauma. Grounding means that you are bringing your focus and attention to what is happening in the present moment.

Some suggestions for grounding yourself include:

- With open eyes, place your feet on the floor. Feel the floor beneath your feet. Say your name out loud, where you are and the date/time. Repeat this and affirm that you are safe in this moment. Move through this process as many times as needed to bring your mind into the present moment.
- Take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and then slowly let the air out. Repeat this breathing pattern with your eyes open so that you can take in where you are and what is happening around you. For more focus, use your sense of sight to count shapes, colours, or objects around you.

How can others help when you dissociate?

When you experience dissociation, it is your job to ground yourself. With practice you will become your most effective tool in coping with dissociation. However, you can ask family and friends to assist you in some ways:

- When you're still learning to recognize the signs and symptoms of dissociation in yourself, you might ask someone close to you to help you identify times when you are dissociated, so that you can begin to understand how dissociation feels in your body
- You can teach your favourite grounding activity to a loved one and ask them to help guide you through it if they notice you are dissociating
- You can ask someone close to you to remind you to ground yourself