

Dissociation

Dissociation is a disconnection between a person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions or sense of who they are. This is a normal process that everyone has experienced. Examples of mild, common dissociation include daydreaming, highway hypnosis or "getting lost" in a book or movie, all of which involve "losing touch" with awareness of one's immediate surroundings.

For many people, dissociation is a natural response to trauma that they can't control. It could be a response to a one time traumatic event or ongoing trauma and abuse.

During a traumatic experience such as an accident, disaster or crime victimisation, dissociation can help an individual tolerate what might otherwise be too difficult to bear. In situations like these, a person may dissociate the memory of the place, circumstances or feelings of the event, mentally escaping from the fear, pain and horror. This may make it difficult to later remember the details of the experience.

Most commonly, repetitive childhood physical and/or sexual abuse and other forms of trauma are associated with the development of dissociative disorders (e.g., Putnam, 1985). In the context of chronic, severe childhood trauma, dissociation can be considered adaptive because it reduces the overwhelming distress created by trauma. However, if dissociation continues to be used in adulthood, when the original danger no longer exists, it can be maladaptive.

There are five main ways in which the dissociation of psychological processes changes the way a person experiences living: depersonalization, derealization, amnesia, identity confusion, and identity alteration.

What Are The Common Types Of Dissociation

The most extreme form of dissociation, dissociative identity disorder, where someone experiences two or more distinct personalities, is extremely rare. Depersonalization, derealization and dissociative amnesia are more common types of dissociation. In dissociative amnesia, you are unable to remember things about yourself, a period of time, event, or even your own identity. Dissociative amnesia can last from a few minutes to several years.

Depersonalization feels as though you are having an out of body experience. It is common to feel detached from yourself as if you are watching what is happening from outside of your body. With derealization, you may feel as though the things and people around you are not real.

What Are The Symptoms Of Dissociation

One of the most common symptoms of dissociation is zoning out. Feeling disconnected from your body or numb to your emotions is another common symptom. Memory loss, daydreaming, and having flashbacks are all symptoms of dissociation. A more extreme symptom is losing touch with reality. Most people will experience mild forms of dissociation at times. However, dissociation can become problematic if it interferes with your ability to function effectively in one or more areas of your life. If this happens, a dissociative disorder may have developed and treatment will be needed.

Dissociative Disorders in Adulthood

The development of dissociative disorders in adulthood appears to be related to the intensity of dissociation during the actual traumatic event(s); severe dissociation during the traumatic experience increases the likelihood of generalisation of such mechanisms following the event(s). The experience of ongoing trauma in childhood significantly increases the likelihood of developing dissociative disorders in adulthood (International Society for the Study of Dissociation, 2002; Kisiel & Lyons, 2001; Martinez-Taboas & Guillermo, 2000; Nash, Hulse, Sexton, Harralson & Lambert, 1993; Siegel, 2003; Simeon et al., 2001; Simeon, Guralnik, & Schmeidler, 2001; Spiegel & Cardeña, 1991).