Emotions

To Connect or Disconnect?: *That is the Question*

Objectives:

- To explore the ways in which intensely disturbing or traumatic experiences may cause us to disconnect from our bodies, emotions, thoughts and memories
- To help participants understand what "dissociation" is and how it relates to trauma.

Leader Guidelines:

- Make sure there are sufficient writing instruments for each person to fill in the handout.
- If someone in the group is reluctant to reveal very much about themselves, respect their reserve but ask them to complete the exercise in writing on the worksheet instead.
- Look for ways that the participants talk about spacing out, or when the connections between the way they feel and events that are unfolding become separated.
- People lose connections to their bodies, their feelings, their thoughts and their memories. This is known as "dissociation". In the body, this loss of connection may develop into a "conversion disorder". The loss of connection to feelings is often called "emotional numbing". The loss of connection to thoughts can be thought of as disorientation, spacing out, going blank. Loss of connection to memory is known as "amnesia".

Directions:

- Leader asks new members to introduce themselves
  - What is your name?
  - Ask each person to explain in just a few sentences the circumstances that brought them to the agency/program/organization?

- Go around the room and give everyone a chance to introduce themselves
- Leader distributes the handout *S.E.L.F. Group Guidelines* and *Introduction to SELF* to new members, reviews both as appropriate

- **Leader asks participants to think of the last time they were in a situation that was tedious, boring and time-consuming, i.e. driving on a highway, sitting on a subway, waiting in a long line.**
  - Ask them what they did to cope with the tedium?
  - Did they space out, read something, talk on the phone, daydream?
- **Leader asks group members to think of the words that are commonly used to describe the experience of being "disconnected".**
  - Distribute the handout, *Do You Disconnect?*
- **Leader develops the idea in the group of what it is like to be in a situation where you are doing two things at once but focusing on one and maintaining only a tenuous connection to the other.**
  - Explain to the group that if we are doing two things at a time we are "multitasking" – but how do we do that?
  - We separate our mental abilities without even thinking about it under many normal circumstances.
  - This enables us to do more than one thing at a time – it's very efficient.
- **Leader then asks the participants what they are likely to feel if there is a long traffic jam on the highway, or the subway gets stuck in a tunnel, or the line doesn't seem to move at all and they have to use a restroom.**
  - Develop the sense of growing discomfort, anger, frustration and other strong emotions and physical sensations that a person is likely to feel.
- **Leader then asks what happens under circumstances that are very frightening or horrifying?**
  - Ask the participants if anyone is willing to share what has happened to them when something completely overwhelming has occurred and they are helpless to react.
  - Focus on examples that illustrate disconnection – not knowing what you feel, not feeling like you are in your body, not knowing what to do, being confused about where you are.
- **Now leader asks the participants what they suppose might happen to someone who is frightened over and over again?**
  - Point out that the inclination to disconnect from feelings, thoughts, memories, and bodily sensations could become automatic, seemingly beyond the person's control.
- **Leader asks participants to describe the problems that might arise for someone who automatically disconnects from bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts and memories – the price we pay for being out of touch with our feelings, thoughts, memories or bodily sensations.**
  - What is wrong with using avoidance as a way of dealing with problems?
  - Leader should solicit answers such as:
    - Things pile up,

- The problem does not get fixed,
- The problem gets worse,
- It becomes difficult to spot more danger,
- You don't learn from your mistakes,
- You cannot make choices that might avoid further harm.

- **Leader tells participants that disconnection from present reality makes it impossible to make better choices for the future, or even to take appropriate and purposeful action in the present.**
- **Leader asks the group to discuss ways that it might be possible to stay connected in the here-and-now when that is appropriate.**
  - This can begin a discussion of "grounding techniques"

Handout: ***Do You Disconnect?***



Fearless



Spellbound

Keywords: **dissociation, confusion, grounding**

THOUGHT FOR TODAY

The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing… not healing, not curing… that is a friend who cares.

Henri Nouwen, Dutch writer, (1932-1996)

Handout

Do You Disconnect?

To Connect or Disconnect: That is the Question

Here are some words that are commonly used to describe the experience of disconnecting from oneself or "dissociating. Check the ones that apply to you.

☑	*Words for Disconnection*
	Spaced out
	Numb
	Daydream
	Zoning out Lost Isolation
	Fear Out-of-it Safety – feeling safe
	Outside of body
	Confusions
	Out of time/space
	Escape
	Not thinking of anything
	Avoidance
	Survival tactics
	Forgetting
	Split

Have you ever experienced something so overwhelming that you disconnected from your feelings, your memories or from your body? If so, can you describe what you experienced?

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What price do people pay for being out of touch with their feelings, thoughts, memories, body sensations?

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What do you do to stay grounded?

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