

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Types Of Dissociation



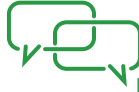
Description

Therapists and clients may both experience dissociation as confusing or frightening. Dissociation doesn't have to be complicated though – it can be simplified to the message “my mind keeps taking me away from the present moment”. Dissociation can be separated into everyday and pathological versions. Everyday dissociation, an example of which might be ‘driving on autopilot’, is a consequence of becoming so absorbed that attention is not automatically redirected to other stimuli. Pathological dissociation often occurs in the context of trauma.

When experienced *during* a traumatic experience, dissociation is understood to be a self-preservation reaction, designed to prevent further injury or to prevent the antagonization of a perpetrator. When experienced *after* a trauma, dissociation might be understood as a form of ‘tuning in’ to traumatic memories (flashbacks) or ‘tuning out’ from the world. The *Types Of Dissociation* information handout is designed for clients who have experienced trauma and describes dissociation using accessible terminology.

Instructions

Suggested Question



Do you ever have the experience where you have an unwanted memory from the past? Or do you experience times when you 'zone out' or lose track of time? Sometimes psychologists call experiences like these 'dissociation' and really it just means 'my mind keeps taking me away from the present moment'. These experiences might feel strange or scary, but they are actually really common responses to traumatic, frightening, or inescapable situations.

References

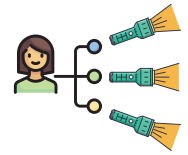
Kennedy, F., Kennerley, H., & Pearson, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Cognitive behavioural approaches to the understanding and treatment of dissociation*. Routledge.

Schauer, M., & Elbert, T. (2010). Dissociation following traumatic stress: Etiology and treatment. *Journal of Psychology*, 218, 109-127.

Types Of Dissociation

Our attention can be deliberate

Our conscious awareness (what we are paying attention to) is like a spotlight in the darkness. We are aware of what is under the light and not aware of what is outside the light's beam. When we decide to pay attention to something the light shines in that direction.



We can normally choose to pay attention to any of our senses:



Sight



Sound



Touch



Smell



Taste



Emotion

Our attention can be automatic

Our attention is often redirected automatically. This can happen when:



- you hear an unexpected noise.
- you bump a part of your body and become aware of it.
- a thought pops into your mind.

Everyday dissociation



Sometimes you can become so absorbed by what you are doing that you do not get distracted by things going on around you – we do not pay attention to the 'distractions' and they do not make it through to awareness. This is an example of **everyday dissociation**.

(Good examples include getting absorbed in a book, daydreaming or 'driving on autopilot')

Dissociation during trauma

During certain types of traumatic event **your body and mind may decide for you that it would endanger you to move or feel** because it could cause further injury or antagonize a perpetrator. The result is dissociation. You might feel strangely separate from you body, or from the world.

Trauma properties that often cause dissociation:

- Where escape is not possible.
- Being in close contact to a dangerous perpetrator.
- Sexual assault or abuse.
- Contact with bodily fluids.



Common feelings experienced during dissociation:

- Feeling 'separate' from what is happening.
- Body frozen or immobile.
- Going 'off' somewhere in your mind.
- Feeling numb.
- Not feeling pain.
- Feeling hopeless / defeated.

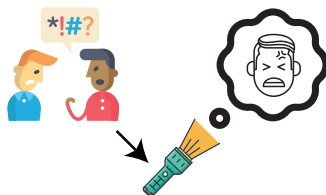


Dissociation after trauma

People who survive severe trauma, or trauma from which they cannot escape, often experience a range of problematic symptoms. Psychologists think that some of these symptoms are forms of dissociation.

You might 'tune in' to unwanted memories.

A trigger causes you to have a memory called a flashback. If the memory is really strong you might temporarily lose touch with what you are doing – it can feel as though the event from the past is happening again right now.



You might 'tune out' from the world

You might have periods where you feel separate or detached from your self (depersonalization) or separate and detached from the world (derealization). These episodes might be relatively brief but can become recurrent and chronic. You may or may not be aware of specific triggers for these experiences (people, places, situations, feelings).



Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

Our digital library encompasses information handouts, worksheets, workbooks, exercises, guides, and audio skills-development resources.

Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



Resource details

Title: Types Of Dissociation
 Type: Information Handout
 Language: English (US)
 Translated title: Types Of Dissociation

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/types-of-dissociation>
 Resource format: Professional
 Version: 20230721
 Last updated by: JP

Terms & conditions

This resource may be used by licensed members of Psychology Tools and their clients. Resources must be used in accordance with our terms and conditions which can be found at: <https://www.psychologytools.com/terms-and-conditions/>

Disclaimer

Your use of this resource is not intended to be, and should not be relied on, as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you are suffering from any mental health issues we recommend that you seek formal medical advice before using these resources. We make no warranties that this information is correct, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. As a professional user, you should work within the bounds of your own competencies, using your own skill and knowledge, and therefore the resources should be used to support good practice, not to replace it.

Copyright

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is Copyright © 2023 Psychology Tools Limited. All rights reserved.