

Coping with Dissociation Handout

Your inner experiences can be powerful. By understanding them better, you can learn ways to cope.

Integration – A person’s personality that functions as an organized, unified whole. It includes knowing who you are and the difference between the past and the present. As we grow up, the more safe and secure our emotional and physical environment is, the more we are able to develop healthy integration. You might say, “I am *me* in good times and when I am overwhelmed. My behaviors, emotions, and memories belong to me.”

Dissociation – A lack of integration, when our sense of self and our personality changes. Experiences or perceptions can disturb our ability to “keep it together.” Painful memories can divide your sense of self. You might feel like, “Those aren’t my experiences. I am not like that.” When you are extremely tired, stressed or seriously ill, your thoughts, feelings and behaviors may not feel like your own. It is harder to “shift gears” smoothly from one response pattern to another.

Dissociation can be from:

- Intrusive thoughts, like flashbacks of past traumatic events,
- Sudden feelings, thoughts, impulses or behaviors that come “out of the blue.”
- Jarring inner experiences that don’t feel like your own may include pain or other sensations, feeling physically controlled, or hearing disturbing voices.

Dissociation can be hard to describe, but there are some **common symptoms**:

- Feeling foggy, fuzzy or spacey and losing a firm connection with the present
- Having strong negative images, feelings or thoughts (either from the past or about the future) that preoccupy your mind
- Feeling like you are “watching yourself” but not in control of your actions
- Retreating to daydreams when life feels too stressful or losing track of time
- Being in a place without knowing how you got there
- Hearing yourself talking when it seems like the thoughts and words you hear are not your “own”
- Having body sensations that don’t feel like they belong to you
- Hearing voices in your head that talk to you or to each other

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When you are under stress, in a painful conflict or having intense emotion, you may want to retreat and avoid it. But that can make your problems worse. Being in the present, being aware of your surroundings and of yourself is the best way to learn, grow and heal. When you are in the present, the past is behind you. Try the following activities to help you focus your attention on *here and now*:

Sight: Look around the room for something (or someone) that can help remind you that you are in the present, like a pieces of clothing you are wearing, objects, colors, shapes, or pictures on the wall. Name the objects to yourself out loud.

Sound: Listen to the normal everyday noises like a furnace or air conditioner, a refrigerator running, people talking, doors opening or closing, traffic sounds, birds singing, a fan blowing. Remind yourself, “These are the sounds of normal life all around me. I am safe. I am here.”

Smell: Carry something small with you that smells pleasant, like a favorite hand lotion, perfume, aftershave, or an aromatic fruit like an orange. A pleasant smell can be a powerful reminder of the “here and now”.

Touch: Touch the chair you are sitting on, or touch your clothes. Feel the textures and weight of the fabric. Push on the floor with your feet and feel the floor supporting you. Squeeze your hands together. Let the pressure and warmth remind you of “here and now”. Press your tongue hard to the roof of your mouth. Cross your arms over your chest with your fingertips on your collar bones and pat your chest, alternating left and right. Remind yourself that you are in the present and are safe. (The Butterfly Hug, Artigas & Jarero, 2005).

Breathing: Breathe in through your nose to a slow count of three, then pause for a count of three and breathe out through your mouth to a slow count of three. Do this several times, being mindful of your breathing.

To cope with distressing thoughts and bring together the “split self”, stay safe, use grounding techniques, be with other people, notice any warning signs or patterns, and talk to your health care team about the experiences.