

Dissociation Explanation

Introduction: What is Dissociation?

Dissociation is the term used to describe a coping mechanism that is used by people to disconnect from some aspect of experience in life. Often its use is quite automatic, an unconscious activity of the mind, but it can also be used deliberately by some people. Although many people may have the ability to dissociate, some do not use it much, if at all, while others use it a lot. For some folks, it may be the only, or at least the most preferred method of dealing with the stresses of life. There are various degrees of dissociation, which can range from normal to problematic in a person's life.

How Dissociation Develops

Those who research this phenomena of human functioning are making new discoveries about this, and are still not exactly sure of all that might cause this to occur, but there seem to be some common observations that are made of people who dissociate:

- They are often highly intelligent and highly creative individuals (although they often do not see themselves as such).
- They are generally highly sensitive emotionally, seeming to notice and be affected by the emotional tone of their environment more so than some others around them, often having a tendency towards strong compassion and empathy for other humans and/or creatures.
- Most of them have suffered a significant degree of trauma and/or abuse in their lives. This includes traumatic events such as accidents, serious illness, etc., and/or any type of abuse, whether physical, emotional or sexual. In fact, it seems that the occurrence of trauma or abuse is almost always present in a person's history, when dissociation is an issue, and those who have been traumatized or abused almost always have dissociated to some degree.

How Dissociation Works

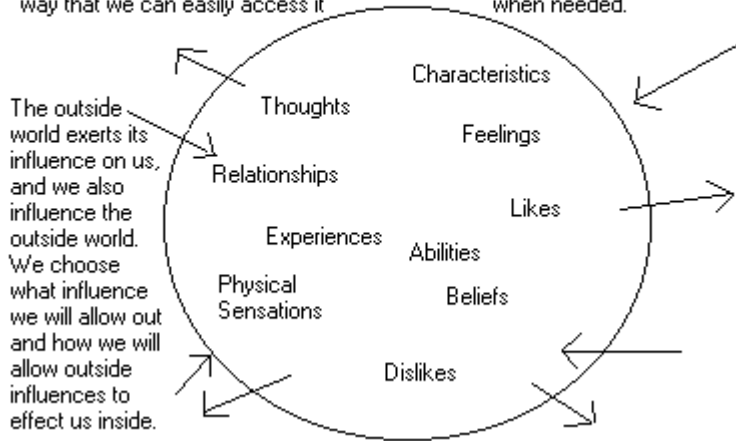
Dissociation is actually a natural function of normal life. Most of us have used it at one point or another. Here are some examples:

Little children are usually very good at dissociation, and this is especially evident in their play. Perhaps you can recall as a child, going to imaginary places in your mind, or making up stories in which you were one character (or maybe more), or pretending to be someone or something for the sake of some game you were playing. Or, even if you personally don't recall this, think about what you have observed of children at play. They can become completely absorbed in the game they are playing, and for the moment, they BECOME the princess, or the prince, or the fireman, or the nurse, or the doctor, or the good guy, or the bad guy, or the cat, or the dog, or... If you try to break in on their game, you may find that they are disoriented for a brief moment, and have not even heard you, they were so involved in what they were doing. They have been very naturally and normally dissociating.

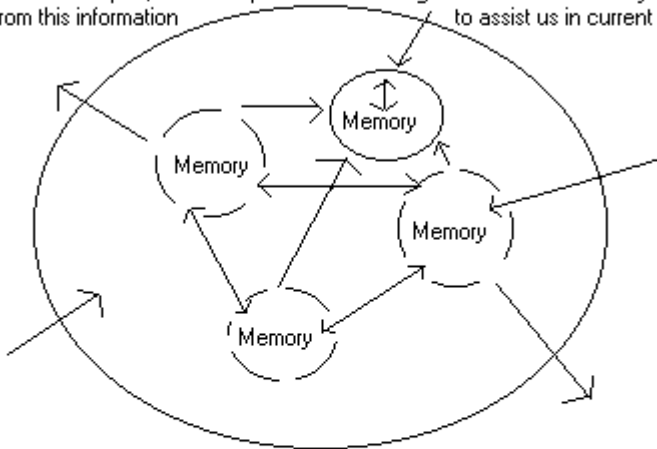
This is the ability that children may automatically use when facing difficulties that are too much for them to handle as children ... The child simply "becomes" another person, often without any conscious decision to do so, have the things happen to that person, not oneself ... and the child is able to move on in life and survive. This is because, as far as they are concerned, it never happened to them, or the memory of it has been significantly minimized to a manageable size, since the experience was borne, or at least shared by "someone else". If the event is traumatic enough, it may even be blocked entirely from the child's conscious memory.

As adults, most of us can point to at least a few times when we have dissociated, although we may not be aware that this is what we were doing. Have you ever been travelling down the road, thinking about something else, and then realized that you have missed the turn you were to take? This is dissociation. Also, we use dissociation just to help us focus on what we need in the current task we are doing, while blocking out other things that could be distractions. For example, when we are focused on doing our job during the day, we are likely not giving much thought to what we are going to eat for the next week, and when we are making up our grocery list, we are likely not focusing on the duties and details of our work. This is normal dissociation. In fact, people who can not keep distractions out have a great deal of difficulty with concentration and therefore with functioning in life.

Each one of us holds in our minds the characteristics that make us who we are, and the memories of our experiences, which inform us about how life is, and teach us how to live within our world. Normally, this information is held in such a way that we can easily access it when needed.



The experiences of our lives we hold in our minds as memories, which are a combination of our own characteristics, abilities, thoughts, feelings, etc. related to the events of our lives. Everything, from the simplest task we learn in infancy, to the later developed, more complex understanding is stored in our memory. We draw from this information to assist us in current life.



Both external and internal influences effect how we access these memories, as we choose to pay attention to developing and presenting to the external world certain parts of ourselves, while keeping other parts of ourselves to ourselves, as seems appropriate to the circumstances. For example, when away from home at work, we will generally not be trying to prepare dinner also . . . we may think about it at work, but we will do that task only when we return home.

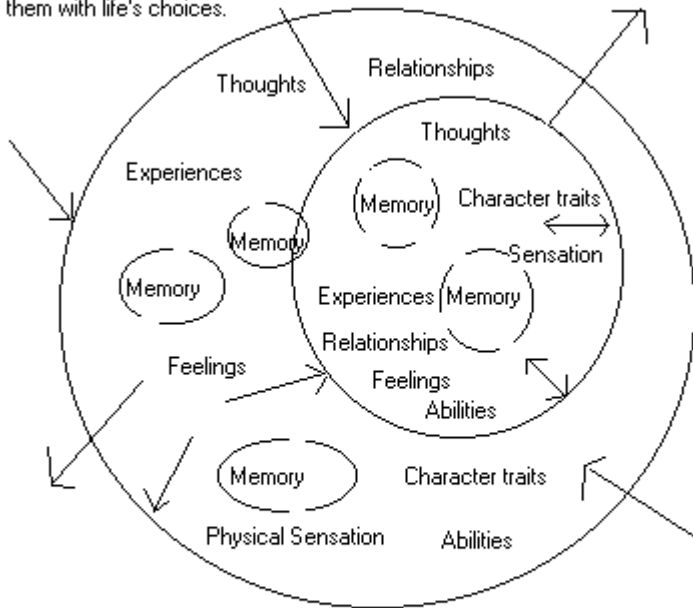
Sometimes, if a person experiences trauma and/or abuse, this ability to adjust one's internal focus is used to protect the person from danger. The memory, or parts of it can then be blocked off in the mind, so that the rest of the system can not access damaging information. As well, good aspects can be blocked off from contact with external sources that may cause harm.

The function of dissociation as a protection from trauma is largely automatic. When an event occurs in life that is too difficult for the person's system to handle and process right away, there is a sort of switch in the brain that is activated, and this blocks out the experience, or parts of the experience, from conscious memory. This can occur often in any type of traumatic event. For example, sometimes with accidents, people are in shock and will have trouble relating the events afterwards. They may be observed during the incident as being conscious by others, but they will sometimes have limited or no recall of the events within a specific time period. As their mind and body settles back to normal, the memories of the event can be recalled more clearly, and they can more coherently describe what happened. *This is a beautiful way in which dissociation functions: It protects the system from becoming overloaded and damaged by too much stress and trauma, by not allowing it all to be fully experienced all at once.*

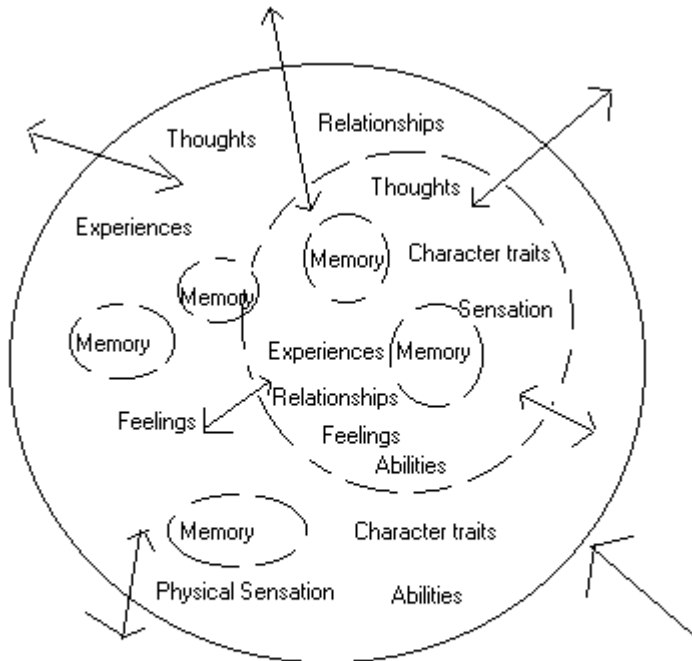
However, this is meant to be a SHORT TERM measure, for survival. When the person begins to recover, and the system is more able to process the event, a fuller memory of what occurred will often come to awareness. When this happens, the person will often feel like they are reliving the event all over again, and in some ways, they are, as some of the experience was blocked off as being too overwhelming to cope with consciously at the time, and is only now being experienced. What needs to happen at this point is for these experiences to be processed, so that they can be stored as a memory that can be described in words, instead of being lived, and relived, as if they were occurring again and again in the current time. This is done by allowing the various aspects of the memory to return and working through and resolving the issues involved in the experience, by using methods other than dissociation.

There are some people, however, for whom dissociation becomes a way of life. Often, this begins in childhood, in the face of difficulties that are too much for a child to handle (eg. abuse). At the same time, effective healthy coping skills are not developed fully in the environment in which they grow up. Dissociation works very well to keep difficulties and struggles undercover, for awhile, but as it was never meant to become a habitual way of coping, it begins to break down. As life becomes more complex in the adult years, the pressure of keeping everything locked up inside becomes too much, memories begin to flash back, begging to be paid attention to and processed, and the old patterns combined with current issues create additional stress. When exactly this happens varies from person to person, but when it does, it can wreak havoc with a person's life and relationships.

The problem with blocked memories, or parts of memories (for example, feelings) is that the person becomes disconnected from both good and bad information, externally and internally, and then loses access to resources that could assist them with life's choices.



If there are enough memories or parts of memories blocked off in a person, these memories can form their own identity, complete with unique characteristics of their own, each carrying specific thoughts and/or feelings and/or memories, and/or life tasks, which may or may not be shared with the rest of the system. In some situations identities may be amnesic, completely cut off from awareness of the person, but do not necessarily have to be this way for the division to exist.



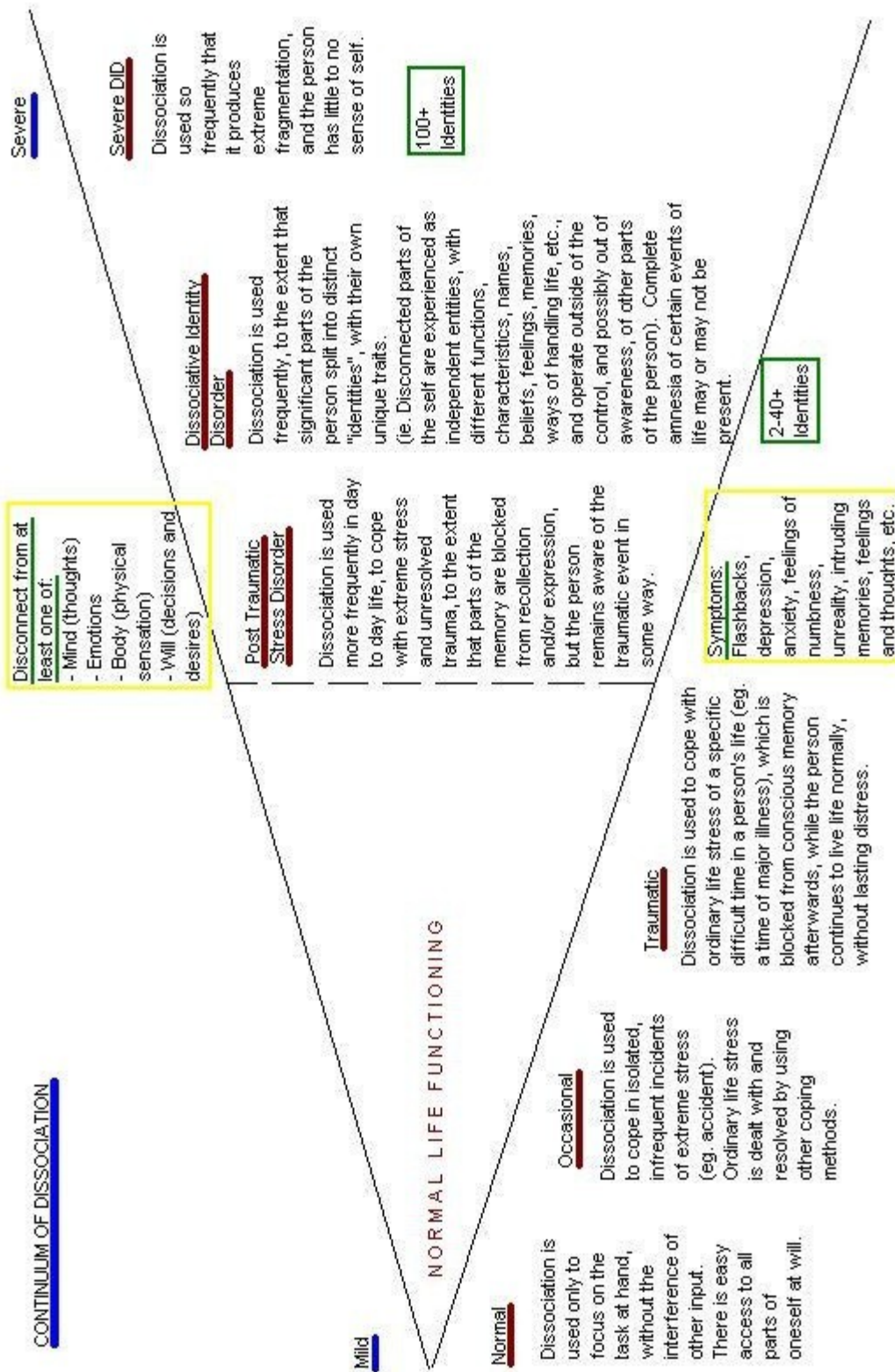
What needs to happen for a person who has become disconnected from parts of themselves is for the boundaries between their inner parts to become more permeable. In other words, the parts need to be healed of the damage caused by the abuse or trauma, and mature internally in order to handle the information that has been held by the other parts, when the rest of the system did not have the strength to cope with it. In essence, this is a process of self acceptance, as one learns to accept and work with all parts of themselves.

In order for these difficulties to be resolved, the person needs to grow and mature in the areas in which they have not developed emotionally and relationally, and begin to discover how to handle life in other ways. For this to occur, healthy relationships in the present are essential, with people who already know how to overcome unhealthy patterns themselves and are in the process of ongoing healthy growth and development in their own lives. To dissociative people, what is more important than an "expert" who knows what they are doing in their "treatment" is a few people who will listen, seek to understand, be safe, and stay with them through their struggles.

Continuum of Dissociation

On the next page is a diagram that can help describe the various degrees of dissociation.

CONTINUUM OF DISSOCIATION



Additional Information

The memory of a traumatic event can come back to conscious recall suddenly when it is "triggered" by some experience in current life. Depending on the amount of dissociation that has occurred, the person may or may not recognize it as a forgotten event that happened to them. At times, a person may overreact to current events without knowing why, when there is something in the current situation that connects to an unprocessed past event that was traumatic for them. In some situations, the traumatic memory may be locked in at the age and stage of the person at the time the event occurred, and when it is accessed again, the person may respond as someone at that earlier age and stage of life.

Increased use of dissociation can produce dysfunction in coping with daily life, especially from the level of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and beyond, as past traumatic memories that have been blocked off interfere. Unless these memories are processed and resolved (not dissociated further), they can become increasingly difficult to manage. Although a person may seem to be able to function fairly well in the short term with dissociation, in the long term this actually decreases the ability to cope and function with the stresses of life.

The symptoms of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) include PTSD symptoms, plus, the parts of the person function independently of one another, with the parts taking turns being "out" (ie. functioning in the world outside the person, speaking, acting, experiencing life events, etc.) while the other parts are "in" (inside the person). Which part is "out" and which is "in" often happens automatically with "triggers", although it can be done deliberately by choice in some situations. Sometimes inside parts may observe what the outside part is doing, and may at times be able to communicate ideas, feelings, or wishes to that outside part, but have no control over what the body actually does, unless it is their turn to be "out".

For some people, at least some inside parts do NOT observe what is happening to the person on the outside at times, and therefore do not recall events, and may not even be aware of other parts. Therefore, they may deny things that other people have clearly observed about them, simply because they are genuinely not aware, and may often be accused of lying because of this. The person may "lose time" (be unaware of what happened during a particular time period), find themselves in strange surroundings without recalling how they got there, find unusual items that they do not recognize in their house, misplace things frequently without being aware of where they put them, have difficulty finding their car in a parking lot because they can't remember where they parked it, etc. This is usually the result of different parts being "out" at different times.

These people are often masters at hiding just how severely they experience these difficulties, and try to act "normal" and go along with things, even if they are confused about what is happening. They will often have a sense of having missed something important, or perceive themselves to have just entered a situation, even if they have been there for some time. These sorts of experiences are what earned DID its previous name of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD).

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