

## **Dissociative disorders**

### **Overview**

Dissociative disorders are mental health conditions that involve experiencing a loss of connection between thoughts, memories, feelings, surroundings, behavior and identity. These conditions include escape from reality in ways that are not wanted and not healthy. This causes problems in managing everyday life.

Dissociative disorders usually arise as a reaction to shocking, distressing or painful events and help push away difficult memories. Symptoms depend in part on the type of dissociative disorder and can range from memory loss to disconnected identities. Times of stress can worsen symptoms for a while, making them easier to see.

Treatment for dissociative disorders may include talk therapy, also called psychotherapy, and medicine. Treating dissociative disorders can be difficult, but many people learn new ways of coping and their lives get better.

### **Symptoms**

Symptoms depend on the type of dissociative disorder, but may include:

- A sense of being separated from yourself and your emotions.
- Thinking that people and things around you are distorted and not real.
- A blurred sense of your own identity.
- Severe stress or problems in relationships, work or other important areas of life.
- Not being able to cope well with emotional or work-related stress.
- Memory loss, also called amnesia, of certain time periods, events, people and personal information.
- Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

The American Psychiatric Association defines three major dissociative disorders: Depersonalization/derealization disorder, dissociative amnesia, and dissociative identity disorder.

### **Depersonalization/derealization disorder**

Depersonalization involves a sense of separation from yourself or feeling like you're outside of yourself. You may feel as if you're seeing your actions, feelings, thoughts and self from a distance, like you're watching a movie.

Derealization involves feeling that other people and things are separate from you and seem foggy or dreamlike. Time may seem to slow down or speed up. The world may seem unreal.

You may go through depersonalization, derealization or both. Symptoms, which can be very distressing, may last hours, days, weeks or months. They may come and go over many years. Or they may become ongoing.

### **Dissociative amnesia**

The main symptom of dissociative amnesia is memory loss that's more severe than usual forgetfulness. The memory loss can't be explained by a medical condition. You can't recall information about yourself or events and people in your life, especially from a time when you felt shock, distress or pain. A bout of dissociative amnesia usually occurs suddenly. It may last minutes, hours, or rarely, months or years.

Dissociative amnesia can be specific to events in a certain time, such as intense combat. More rarely, it can involve complete loss of memory about yourself. It sometimes may involve travel or confused wandering away from your life. This confused wandering is called dissociative fugue.

### **Dissociative identity disorder**

Formerly known as multiple personality disorder, this disorder involves "switching" to other identities. You may feel as if you have two or more people talking or living inside your head. You may feel like you're possessed by other identities.

Each identity may have a unique name, personal history and features. These identities sometimes include differences in voice, gender, mannerisms and even such physical qualities as the need for eyeglasses. There also are differences in how familiar each identity is with the others. Dissociative identity disorder usually also includes bouts of amnesia and often includes times of confused wandering.

### **When to see a doctor**

Sometimes dissociative disorder symptoms occur in a crisis with severe or impulsive behavior. People with these symptoms need care more urgently and in an emergency department at a hospital when safety becomes a concern.

If you or a loved one has less urgent symptoms that may be a dissociative disorder, contact your doctor or other health care professional for help.

### **Causes**

Dissociative disorders usually start as a way to cope with shocking, distressing or painful events. The disorders most often form in children who go through long-term physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Less often, the disorders form in children who've

lived in a home where they went through frightening times or they never knew what to expect. The stress of war or natural disasters also can bring on dissociative disorders.

When you go through an event that's too much to handle emotionally, you may feel like you're stepping outside of yourself and seeing the event as if it's happening to another person. Mentally escaping in this way may help you get through a shocking, distressing or painful time.

### **Risk factors**

You're at greatest risk of having a dissociative disorder if you've had long-term physical, sexual or emotional abuse during childhood.

Other shocking, distressing or painful events also may cause dissociative disorders to arise. These may include war, natural disasters, kidnapping, torture, extensive early-life medical procedures or other events.

### **Complications**

Having a dissociative disorder increases the risk of complications and having other mental health conditions. These may include:

- Depression and anxiety.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Sleep disorders, including nightmares, insomnia and sleepwalking.
- Physical symptoms such as lightheadedness or seizures that are not due to epilepsy.
- Eating disorders.
- Problems with sexual function.
- Problems with alcohol and drug use.
- Personality disorders.
- Major problems in personal relationships, at school and at work.
- Self-injury or high-risk behavior.
- Suicidal thoughts and behavior.

### **Prevention**

Children who are physically, emotionally or sexually abused are at increased risk of developing mental health conditions, such as dissociative disorders. If stress or other personal issues are affecting the way you treat your child, seek help.

- Talk to a trusted person such as a friend, your health care professional or a leader in your faith community.
- Ask for help finding resources such as parenting support groups and family therapists.
- Look for churches, other faith-based groups and community education programs that offer parenting classes that also may help you learn a healthier parenting style.

If you or your child was abused or went through another shocking, distressing or painful event, see a doctor or other health care professional right away. Your doctor can refer you to a mental health professional who can help you or your child recover and learn healthy coping skills. Or you may be able to contact mental health services directly.

## **Diagnosis**

Diagnosis usually involves talking about your symptoms and ruling out any medical condition that could cause the symptoms. Testing and diagnosis often include a referral to a mental health professional to make a diagnosis.

Diagnosis may include:

- **Physical exam.** Your health care professional examines you, talks about your symptoms and reviews your personal history. Certain tests may rule out physical conditions that can cause symptoms such as memory loss and feeling separate from reality. Examples include head injury, certain brain diseases, a severe lack of sleep, and drug or alcohol use.
- **Mental health exam.** Your mental health professional talks with you about your thoughts, feelings and behavior, and your symptoms. With your permission, information from family members or others may be helpful.

## **Treatment**

Dissociative disorders treatment may vary based on the type of disorder you have. Generally, treatment includes talk therapy and medicine.

### **Talk therapy**

Also called psychotherapy, talk therapy is the main treatment for dissociative disorders. This form of therapy involves talking about your disorder and related issues with a mental health professional. Look for a therapist with advanced training or experience in working with people who have had trauma.

Your therapist works with you to help you understand the cause of your condition. Your therapist also can help you develop new ways of coping with stressful situations. Over time, your therapist may help you talk more about the shocking, distressing or painful events you went through. Generally this happens after you have a trusting relationship with your therapist and the coping skills to safely have these conversations.