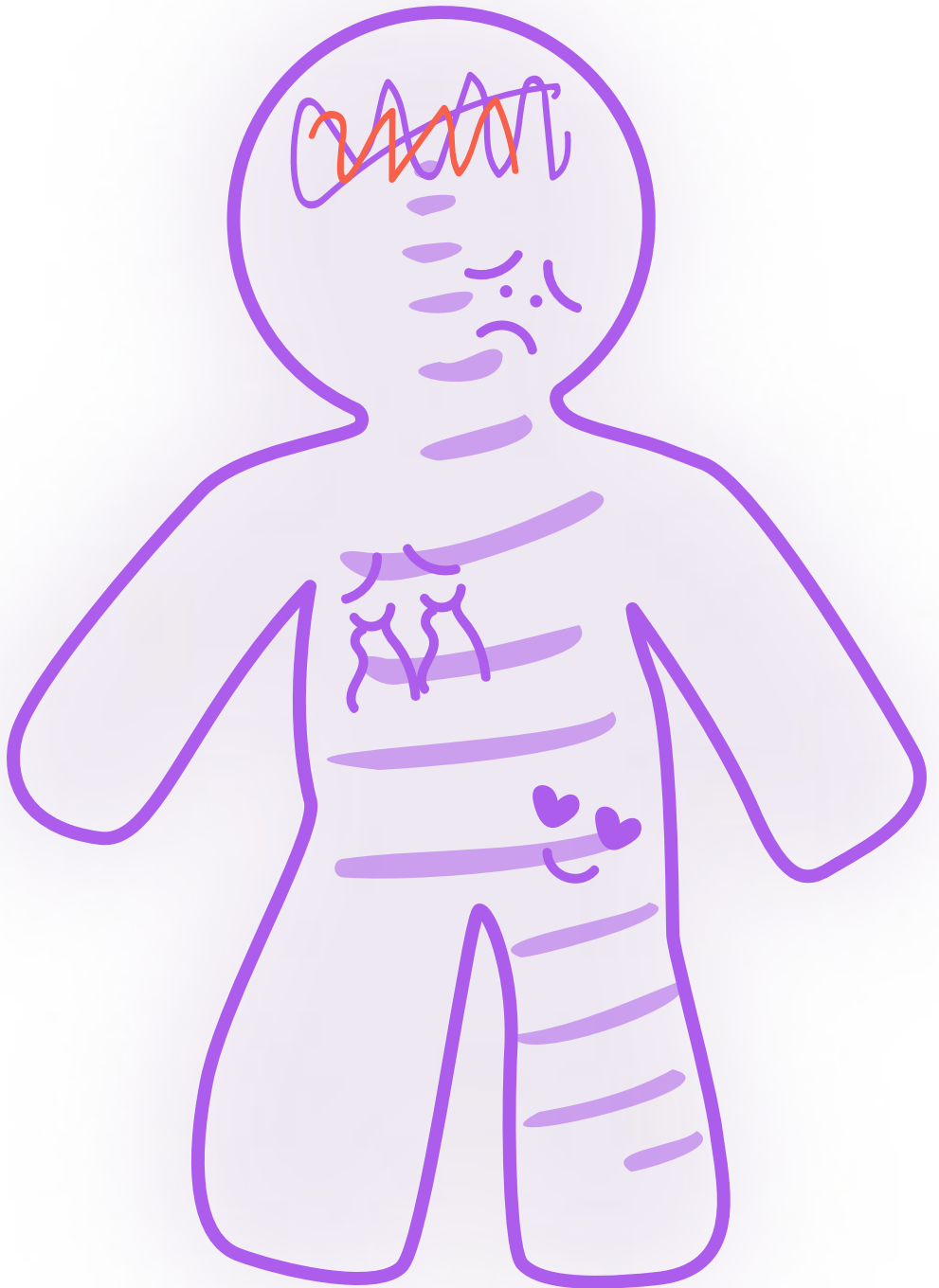


Dissociation



Are there times you lose touch with your body?

Dissociation

Listening to the body

We are in an ongoing conversation with the body. This conversation is not always easy to be present with. Sometimes it feels like the body is screaming for our attention. Other times that the body is deaf and not listening to us.

If we want to improve this conversation, we can learn to listen to the body. Listening to the body might mean becoming aware of the air passing through the nostrils, the ribs expanding with each breath. It might mean being prepared to feel your body alive with movement and pain, emotion and energy.

As we give our body more space to express itself, the body understands that it has our gentle attention. It doesn't need to scream so loudly. But, for many of us this simple act of listening is surprisingly difficult.

Dissociation as a protective strategy

There are many reasons we find it difficult to listen to the body. To listen to the body, we need to be calm and present and connected to ourselves. All the busyness and distraction of life can drown out the quieter signals from the body.

On top of all the noise coming from outside, the brain has its own unconscious strategies to shut out feelings and sensations. Dissociation is the name given to a group of these strategies.



Everyone experiences some degree of dissociation from time to time, especially when sleep deprived, or under a large amount of stress. A bit like a laptop programmed to sense it is overheating shuts itself down, dissociation evolved to protect us from becoming overwhelmed under pressure.

However, dissociation has downsides as a coping strategy. It is often disruptive and distressing, and there are various ways that repeated dissociation leads to symptoms. About 10% of people will experience a level of dissociation that causes them problems (a dissociative disorder) at some point in their life. Dissociative symptoms can be triggered during times of stress.

Types of Dissociation and Symptoms

The word dissociation is used to talk about a range of different types of experiences and symptoms

Absorption or Trance

This group of dissociative experiences involve entering a state of narrowed consciousness. In this state there is less awareness of self and surroundings. It can be understood as a sort of self-hypnosis, that helps us avoid distracting or overwhelming feelings and sensations.

Dissociation is a spectrum. Becoming so absorbed in something you forget the outside world, is a normal experience. It probably helps us focus and get tasks done.



At the other end of the spectrum, some people may get caught in trance like states for long periods of time. This effects attention, memory, and their ability to get things done. They may also experience strange things that are difficult to explain, such as changes in perception (for example colours or sounds appear different).

Detachment

Detachment is the experience of being disconnected from some aspect of your experience. You might feel detached from your emotions, your body, your sense of self, or the world around you. Common experiences include feeling numb, or feeling that things around you are not real. These symptoms may also be described as depersonalization and derealisation.

Although detachment itself is not harmful, it can cause problems. For example, detachment can make it hard to pay attention to the small things day-to-day that are needed to keep the body in balance. For example, remembering to eat when you are hungry.

Compartmentalisation

To explain compartmentalization, think of the inner life as a house with many rooms. In some of the rooms lurk strange monsters that we fear. We prefer not to visit these rooms.

Compartmentalization is like shutting the door on these rooms, so that any monsters are kept on the other side. To make this happen, dissociation temporarily closes down communication between different parts of the brain and body. This can mean you experience a disruption of functions you would normally be able to control.



You might have difficulties remembering things, or controlling parts of your body. For example, not being able to pass urine or not being able to walk in a normal way. People often worry that these weird experiences are symptoms of mental or physical disease.

The freeze response

Some forms of dissociation involve the 'freeze' response. The freeze response is a way the body is able to 'switch-off' the sympathetic nervous system, when it is overwhelmed.

This type of dissociation can be understood as a trauma survival program, left-over from long back in our evolutionary history. It normally (although not always) happens for the first time in a dangerous situation. The physiology involves the dorsal vagus nerve and is related to how insects, like the woodlouse, curl up and freeze when under attack.

In survival mode, you don't process information or make new memories as you normally would. Because of this, entering the freeze state can be a confusing experience. From the outside it can look as though you are having a faint, funny turn, or seizure.

What is going on in the brain when we dissociate

Functional neuroimaging studies have shown that there are some differences in the connectivity of different brain regions in people who tend to dissociate. People with more active brains at rest, a finding related to anxiety, are particularly prone to dissociation.

These changes commonly involve the connections between the Amygdala and the pre-frontal cortex, areas involved in processing strong emotions like fear. Functional connectivity changes are also



seen in the anterior cingulate cortex, a region implicated in action planning and decision-making.

The good news is that dissociative symptoms are temporary (functional). They reverse once the body has recovered its sense of safety.

However, dissociation, like everything our brain does, is subject to learning. Once you have dissociated in a particular way before, you are more likely to dissociate again. If nothing is done to interrupt and reverse this process, it can start to happen more and more easily, effecting more and more parts of life.

Recovering from dissociative symptoms

Although it can be difficult to get to grips with dissociation, there are actions we can take to interrupt dissociation, and reverse dissociative symptoms. These actions are called 'grounding'. If you are floating off into space, getting grounded brings you back into solid reality.

There are various ways to ground. Paying attention to reality helps us to ground. Some people like to start by noticing 5 things in the world around them: 5 sights, 5 sounds, 5 sensations. Some people find strong earthy smells help them ground, such as sage or lavender.

Grounding is helped by feeling the weight (and therefore solid reality) of the body. To do this, move your attention down so you become aware of the ground (chair or bed) beneath you pressing up and supporting you.



Bodysymptoms.

Pressing both hands strongly into the thighs is an easy way for many people to ground, useful when you are sitting with other people. You can try taking off your shoes and socks and walk bare-foot, use a weighted blanket, or give yourself a hand massage.

Grounding (especially if you have practiced the technique beforehand) can help with dissociation in the moment. However, there are no quick fixes, and you will need to keep practicing, not only in the moments you are dissociating.

Understanding the role of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) in dissociation can also help. Reducing worry and calming bodily stress are key steps to get on top of problematic dissociation.

You may find it difficult to stay grounded with difficult feelings, especially if your body is storing memory of trauma. Restless people usually find it helpful to move the body physically before they try to ground. For example, shaking the body is an effective approach that can be practiced safely by most people. Shaking can turn down the Sympathetic Nervous System, so the body feels safe enough to ground.

If you have dissociation related symptoms, it is helpful to find some regular activities that help you feel connected in your body and surroundings. Examples might be swimming, sports, dance or gentle movement, yoga, gardening or walking in nature. These are all activities where you can also find a sense of social connection from meeting up regularly with other people in your community.

You can tell a healthcare professional you trust about your dissociative experiences and ask if they have the time to coach you through some grounding exercises. Therapy can also be a place where you can learn the skills of grounding in your body. If there have been strong traumas in the past, specialist treatment dealing with the bodily memory of them can be beneficial.



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