
DISSOCIATION

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Dissociation is interesting from a communication perspective because the individuals experiences a disconnect from the own person, emotions, thoughts or the world around. In various intensities, it is a common occurrence in many mental health conditions.

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Introduction

Dissociation is a common occurrence in various mental health conditions. However, it can also occur sporadically in various everyday situations. From a communication perspective it is an interesting phenomenon because it leads to a perceived interruption in communication internally or externally, which leads to a feeling of being disconnected from oneself and the world.

Disconnect

Dissociation is a sense of disconnect from one's emotions, body or person. It can range from mild detachment from immediate surroundings to more severe detachment from physical and emotional experience. The major characteristic of all dissociative phenomena involves a detachment from reality, rather than a loss of reality as in psychosis. Reality is not lost in dissociation, but the individual feels more distant from it and less connected with it. This can lead to significant fears and anxiety.

Dissociative conditions can be triggered by trauma as a form of self-protection. While this may work in the moment, it is not helpful in the long-run. Communication is usually desirable over the long-term, but fears can make it difficult in the short run.

Shades of Dissociation

Dissociation is commonly displayed on a continuum. In mild cases, dissociation can be regarded as a coping mechanism or defense mechanisms in seeking to master, minimize or tolerate stress – including boredom or conflict. It can include daydreaming. More pathological dissociation involves dissociative disorders, including dissociative fugue and depersonalization disorder with or without alterations in personal identity or sense of self. These alterations can include: a sense that self or the world is unreal (depersonalization and derealization); a loss of memory (amnesia); forgetting identity or assuming a new self (fugue); and fragmentation of identity or self into separate streams of consciousness (dissociative identity disorder, formerly termed multiple personality disorder) and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Disconnection

A sense of disconnection from various elements of oneself can occur as part of a mental health condition or after a trauma. It traditionally played an important role in psychiatry, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy because it demonstrated how subjective our existence can be. If one is disconnected from oneself emotionally, one does not feel these emotions consciously. If one is disconnected from

one's body or one's own person, it is as if one is observing one's body or one's own person from outside. The sense of being in one's own body is lost.

The disconnectedness is part an illusion because information transfer internally still occurs, and maybe even more so in an anxious state. However, one becomes aware of the information which seems to be missing, more so than the information one is still receiving and sending. This can lead to a detachment from oneself and the world, which in some people is more frightening than in others.

Emotions

The emotions are information rich powerful signals which play important roles. In difficult, or even traumatic situations withdrawing from one's own emotions can be a reaction to reduce pain and suffering. However, only an awareness of the signal contained in the emotion can lead to a processing that will ultimately put the emotion to rest. Dissociation does not alter the emotion and the need for changes in thought, communication and behavior the emotion signals, but it mutes the signal. In the moment this reduces the impact an emotion has on the system, but at the price of delaying any meaningful action or behavior.

Person

The sense of self is the awareness of internal communication, while the sense of personality includes to a greater degree an awareness of the outside communication. As one disconnects internally and externally, both experiences can suffer, that of self and person.

Environment

The information coming from and exchanged with the environment is important to fulfil one's needs, values and aspirations. An experienced disconnect from the environment can thus reduce the sense of place and happiness in the world because the sense of efficacy is lost.

However, information from the environment can also induce states of dissociation, such as traumatic interpersonal events, natural disasters and the like. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that dissociation is often an unconscious mode of protecting oneself if too much communication is perceived as a threat.

Memory

Memory plays an important role in dissociation because inaccessible information about oneself can induce a feeling of being dissociated from oneself. If the memory about oneself, whether about perceptions, sensations, cognitive processes, becomes inaccessible, it reduces the reduces the

resolution of one's self-image. A less detailed self-image can lead to a less stable sense of personality and self, which can make it easier for any cognitive patterns which 'doubt' the existing information about the self, such as self-doubts and the negative thoughts commonly seen in depression. An internal dissociated state thus raises the probability of comorbidity.

A Safety Mechanism?

After trauma, this disconnection may be a protective mechanism by the brain to disconnect from painful and overwhelming feelings. Since humans are constantly exposed to large amounts of information the perceived problem is not the quantity but the changes this information may induce in the present emotional state or the changes in cognition and perspectives it may require.

Therapy

If there is an underlying condition that can be treated easily with a specific form of therapy, this should be the first choice. However, in many situations the dissociation can occur independent from an underlying mental health condition.

Dissociation is reversed through the process it narrows, communication. Several ways of working on communication can be helpful to resolve the unhelpful internal and external communication patterns that maintain the dissociative states. (Haverkamp, 2010, 2017b, 2017a)



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