

RASA
Merseyside

Sexual
Violence
Services

Information
for survivors of
sexual violence

Dissociation



Data and content supplied
by Rape Crisis Scotland

Dissociation

What is dissociation?

- » Dissociation is when the brain ‘disconnects’ from what is happening. It goes somewhere ‘safe’
- » Other words for this include ‘switching off’ or ‘spacing out’
- » Everyone does this at times. A common example is driving somewhere familiar and then realising that you cannot remember parts of the journey
- » Sometimes it is a defence mechanism which helps people survive traumatic events – by cutting off from what is actually happening
- » Dissociation can be very helpful for protecting people when something out of the ordinary happens such as a car crash or the sudden death of someone close
- » People do not choose to dissociate – it usually happens automatically
- » There are different forms of dissociation ranging from mild to severe
- » Dissociation is a natural response to the trauma of sexual violence

How does dissociation affect survivors of sexual violence?

- » Children who are sexually abused may learn to dissociate as a way of coping with the abuse. When abuse happens over a period of time, the perpetrators often expect children to carry on with everyday life, such as going to school, and to behave as if nothing has happened. Dissociation may be a way to block out the abuse when it is happening, as well as to cope with daily life
- » Sexual violence can occur over a long period and so the brain can develop a habit of dissociating in any stressful situation. When this happens, it can cause problems
- » The problems include not being able to remember things; memories being confused or with gaps; not being able to concentrate or keep appointments; switching off; appearing distant and disinterested
- » It can be unsettling if you experience dissociation frequently and if, for example, you do not remember why you are in a certain place or doing a certain thing
- » It may develop into very severe difficulties – or ‘dissociative disorders’
- » Not being able to remember what happened when abused may mean that you are not able to tell yourself or others about it. This can affect the way others understand your experience. For example, many survivors have not felt believed by the police or by people they turn to for support. This can affect self-esteem and self-belief

- » Being unable to remember everything or the exact order in which it happened does not mean that your experience is any less valid. Making sense of what happened, how you feel and sometimes living with uncertainty can also be part of the healing process. With support, many survivors find that they are able to know more clearly what happened

What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

There are things you can do to manage dissociation. Survivors have found the following helpful:

- » Keeping a diary can help you see more clearly what is going on and when. You may be able to spot triggers and patterns
- » ‘Grounding’ techniques can help you stay in the present and help you cope with difficult feelings, memories and thoughts. For example:

- » Take a look around and note what is happening. What can you see and hear? Tell yourself your name and the date and time. You could keep an elastic band on your wrist and ‘ping it’ to bring yourself back to the here and now. Or, you could carry a pebble, a hankie or key-ring in your pocket which you can hold or rub when you feel yourself switching off
- » Focus on your breathing. It will help your body to relax naturally. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe

- ▶ Think of some words which are personal and positive and repeat them to yourself. Try speaking in a comforting tone. Picture something that makes you feel happy and safe. Try to visualise being calm and relaxed when you are dealing with difficult situations

- » Practising ‘mindfulness’ techniques to get away from being on ‘automatic pilot’ and bringing your attention to the here and now. This means noting the things that you might not usually notice about yourself or your surroundings. If your mind drifts off when you do this, try to bring it back and keep practising. For example:
 - ▶ When you are out for a walk notice what your arms and legs, hands and feet are doing; notice your breathing; hear, see and smell what is around you

 - ▶ When you are washing the dishes, notice the temperature of the water, the feeling of the water on your skin, the bubbles, the sounds of the plates

- » Finding practical ways of coping with everyday challenges. If you lose track of time because you dissociate, wear a watch or make sure the screen of your mobile has the date and time

- » Sharing experiences with others who have the same issues can be helpful. The RCS Helpline can help you find out if there are any such support groups near you

Remember: you are important. Your feelings matter. You do not have to cope on your own.

Help and information

There are many people who want to help. You can phone/email the RCS Helpline for support and information. We can tell you about services in your area. You do not need to give your name. RCS Helpline (6pm to midnight every day) on 08088 01 03 02 or email anytime on support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

If you are feeling overwhelmed and you think this is having a serious effect on your health, speak to your GP or another professional. They may be able to refer you for talking or other therapies which can help you manage better.

The information in this leaflet draws on various sources including those below. **You can find more information online at:**

- » www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk
- » Information after rape and sexual assault:
www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0
- » www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk
- » www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp
- » www.mind.org.uk
- » www.getselfhelp.co.uk

App: eCBT Trauma

A useful book is: *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Laura Davis, 1990. Published by: HarperCollins in paperback.

Local rape crisis centres

Rape Crisis Centres are located in all local authorities in Scotland; for the most up to date contact information and referral criteria please go to: www.rapecrisisScotland.org.uk/about-local-rapecrisis-centres/

Aberdeen

Rape Crisis Grampian

Argyll & Bute

Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis Centre

Dumfries & Galloway

Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Support Centre

Dundee

Women's Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre

East Ayrshire

The STAR Centre

Edinburgh

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

Fife

Fife Rape & Sexual Assault Centre

Forth Valley

Forth Valley Rape Crisis

Glasgow & Clyde

Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis Centre

Lanarkshire

Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre

Moray

Moray Rape Crisis

Orkney

Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service

Perth

Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre Perth & Kinross

Highland

Rape & Sexual Abuse Service Highland

Scottish Borders

Scottish Borders Rape Crisis Centre

Shetland

Shetland Rape Crisis

Western Isles

Western Isles Rape Crisis Centre



Helpline 0151 666 1392
helpline@rasamerseyside.org

Helpline Times:

Tuesday - 6-8pm

Thursday 6-8pm

Friday 12-2pm

Information & Referral Line Contact Numbers:

Liverpool/Sefton 0151 558 1801

Wirral 0151 650 0155