

Signs of Dissociation Handout

Dissociation is a complex psychological process that can manifest in various ways, often as a response to trauma or stress. It involves a disconnection between thoughts, feelings, memories, and sense of identity. Recognizing the signs of dissociation is crucial for accurate diagnosis and effective treatment. The following is a guide to the common manifestations of dissociation:

Feeling detached from oneself

Individuals may feel disconnected from their body, mind, emotions, or sensations. They might describe feeling like an outside observer of their own life, or compare themselves to a robot or automaton. Emotional and physical numbness is common, as is difficulty recognizing or describing emotions. Many struggle to connect with or clearly recall their memories.

Distorted perception of reality

People experiencing dissociation might feel as if they're in a dream or separated from their environment by an invisible barrier. The world may appear lifeless or artificial. Perceptual distortions are frequent, such as objects seeming blurry, unusually clear, flat, smaller, or larger than normal. Sounds might be perceived as louder or softer, and time may seem to move too slowly or quickly.

Unusual memory loss or gaps

Dissociative amnesia goes beyond normal forgetfulness. It can involve losing memories of specific events, types of experiences, or large portions of childhood. This may manifest as:

- **Localized amnesia:** This involves the inability to recall a specific event or time period, often related to trauma. For example, a person might be unable to remember the details of a car accident or the months surrounding a significant loss. This type of amnesia serves as a psychological defense mechanism, helping the individual cope with overwhelming experiences.
- **Selective amnesia:** In this form, individuals forget only certain parts of events during a specific period. For instance, someone might remember attending a party but be unable to recall conversations or interactions that occurred there. This partial memory loss can be particularly confusing for the individual and those around them.
- **Generalized amnesia:** This is a more severe form where individuals lose their sense of identity and life history. They may forget who they are, where they live, their profession, and even their family members. This type of amnesia is rare but can be extremely distressing and disorienting for the individual experiencing it.
- **Systematized amnesia:** Here, memory loss is specific to a particular category of information. For example, someone might forget everything related to their workplace or all information about a specific person in their life. This targeted memory loss can significantly impact daily functioning and relationships.
- **Continuous amnesia:** In this ongoing form of memory disruption, individuals struggle to form new memories. They may forget each new event as it occurs, making it challenging to navigate daily life.

and maintain relationships. This type of amnesia can be particularly frustrating as it affects the ability to learn from experiences and adapt to new situations.

It is also worth noting that many individuals are unaware of these memory gaps until they're pointed out by others.

Experience of multiple identities

This can present in two forms:

1. **Possession form:** Obvious changes in speech and behavior, as if another person or entity has taken control. In this form, the individual may speak in a different voice, use different language patterns, or display knowledge and skills that seem foreign to their usual self. Others might observe dramatic shifts in personality, as if interacting with an entirely different person.
2. **Non-possession form:** Subtle shifts in affect or interpersonal manner, often accompanied by feelings of depersonalization. These changes might be less noticeable to others but can be profoundly disorienting for the individual experiencing them. They may feel as if they're observing their own thoughts and actions from a distance, unable to fully control or connect with their behavior.

Individuals may experience sudden changes in thoughts, impulses, or emotions that feel foreign to them. Observable signs can include abrupt changes in attitudes, opinions, or preferences.

Understanding these signs is crucial for recognizing dissociative experiences and providing appropriate support and treatment.

References

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