

Survivors' Experiences of Dissociating in Counselling Sessions: a preliminary summary from research interviews

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The survivors who participated in this research gave their accounts with enormous honesty and generosity, and with the intention that sharing their experiences would support other survivors and would also improve and develop therapeutic practice.

The summary here is given with deep appreciation and gratitude for their gift.

About the research

This research was undertaken with eight survivors of childhood sexual abuse who experience dissociation.

Research participants were asked to describe their dissociative experiences, and also to think particularly about these experiences when they occurred within the context of counselling sessions. The summary given here is of what the research participants themselves told and described.

Anyone wishing further information should contact Naomi directly via the email address below.

Summary:

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SECTION 1: CORE FINDING

**Dissociative experiences are
unique, distinctive, and particular to each individual**

A central finding from the research interviews is that each person has dissociative experiences that are unique, distinctive, and different in some (or many) ways from others. There are common themes that we can learn from, but even these are experienced uniquely and differently by each person.

Much of the theoretical literature that diagnoses dissociative experiences tends to group these experiences into broad categories and to generalise about them; what comes out so strongly from the interviews is that dissociating is far more complex and subtle than that. This is an important finding, and it has been enabled because of the voices and experiences of the survivors who took part in this research.

An important implication of this diverse range of experiences is that counsellors working with clients who dissociate should pay close attention to learning about their clients' particular experiences, to how these experiences affect the client, and what the client needs from their counsellor in relation to these experiences.

These interviews provide strong and direct evidence of how diverse and varied dissociative experiences are, and how people's needs at these times are also diverse. An important implication of this is that counsellors need to pay close attention to learning about each client's particular experiences, learning about and understanding each individual's way of experiencing and understanding dissociation, and discovering what each person needs from their counsellor in relation to these experiences.

SECTION 2: AN OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS' DISSOCIATIVE EXPERIENCES

Where do they happen?

- Only in counselling sessions
- Both in counselling sessions and elsewhere

When do they happen?

- When working on abuse memories in counselling
- Since childhood and still happen frequently
- Since childhood and now happen only occasionally

What are they like?

(please see [Appendix 1](#) for a more comprehensive list of descriptions given by survivors)

- Sudden, with no warning
- Gradual, like a feeling of distance
- Focusing hard on one particular thing (the carpet, for example)
- Losing awareness of everything
- Disconnecting from self
- Disconnecting from others
- Flashbacks and traumatic memories
- Times of blankness
- Intense
- Brief
- Prolonged

Participants' feelings about their dissociative experiences

- Exhausting
- Helpless
- Frustrating
- Distressing
- Frightening
- Lonely
- An escape
- A torment

This section gives an idea again of the range of dissociative experiences discussed in the interviews. A common theme here is that dissociating has a strong emotional impact, for most people a negative one, and therefore it is important that counsellors get to know what is happening for their clients at these times. Clients ought not to be left on their own to deal with and process these significant experiences.

SECTION 3: WHY DO PARTICIPANTS HAVE DISSOCIATIVE EXPERIENCES?

There was a range of reasons given by participants for why they experience dissociative episodes and what causes them. These reasons are:

- Not feeling safe
- Triggered by memory of abuse
- Struggling to believe the reality of the abuse
- Difficulty of talking about abuse
- Worrying about what others are thinking and feeling
- Having overwhelming emotions
- Not feeling fully heard
- Not feeling enough empathy from the listener

In [Appendix 2](#) you will find more detail of what people said about what causes them to dissociate, and you will also see that everyone's experiences are again very individual. For example, some participants said that feeling safe is vital in helping them not to dissociate, whereas others said that dissociative experiences just happen and aren't something that can be controlled or prevented.

SECTION 4: WHAT COUNSELLORS NEED TO KNOW

- The importance of a creative, flexible, warm and nurturing counselling relationship and environment
- Sensitive and fine attunement moment by moment
- To understand the power of trauma and how it can affect every day, every place, every interaction. To understand the level of hypervigilance and fear that can be present. Counsellor needs to be sensitive to this
- Importance of people feeling safe in therapy. Part of this includes trying not to do unusual or unexpected things
- To make sure that people know they are believed
- The importance of connection and trying to stay connected with clients, staying gently present, but without pushing or demanding, prepared to wait
- Counselling is important in helping people to feel less alone, in understanding themselves, and in feeling more empathy for themselves and others
- Empathy needs to be communicated and if a person is dissociating this may take more work and more persistence for the person to know that the counsellor really understands. It can make people feel less safe if they don't feel understood
- To know that even if someone doesn't seem to be hearing the counsellor, that what is being said can still be going in and it is still important to say it. Important not to give up on trying to communicate
- To know how caught in silence survivors can feel, wanting to speak but unable, afraid, and how isolating that is and how it can feel like being trapped and like not existing
- Important to slow down and look at moments when there has been some misreading or misunderstanding of each other, so that the moment does not turn into something bigger and filled with anxiety and fear. Processing these moments
- To sense when an experience might be becoming overwhelming and then trying to bring the person out of it. Counsellors need to know that clients might need to take a break from distressing material, for sessions to be paced so that clients are not overwhelmed by the experiences they are exploring
- Counsellors should ask directly about dissociative experiences, be upfront about it and not avoid the subject or be over-careful. It is better to ask and have that difficult conversation than not to know and then be unable to support clients
- To know that if a client is actually dissociating then it is not helpful to ask lots of questions, that things need to be slower until clients are more fully present again. Also to know that clients might struggle to follow a conversation at these times
- To inform themselves about dissociating and how clients might experience this, so they can recognise it and respond appropriately and empathically, and to be prepared to initiate conversations about dissociating. Reviews of the counselling work can be used to discuss the impact of dissociative experiences in sessions and what might be needed at those times

APPENDIX 1: WAYS OF DESCRIBING DISSOCIATIVE EXPERIENCES

Here are some significant, emphasised and repeated words from the interviews. Notice how many involve space (being somewhere else, away, behind something, parallel), reflecting how the person is there and not there when they are dissociative, how they are both in and out of the physical and emotional space.

- Disconnecting
- Feeling fuzzy
- Pins and needles
- In and out (of the present physical space)
- Stuck somewhere else
- Feeling lost and small
- Being frozen
- Losing track
- Being away, gone, and being back
- Coming and going, leaving and returning
- Zoning out
- Feeling spaced out, not fully present
- Far away from things
- Switching off, shutting down
- Life going out of you
- Unreal and surreal feeling
- Here physically but not here psychologically, emotionally
- Being divided, being parallel to yourself
- Talking with someone else's voice
- Feeling trapped
- In a wilderness
- Being behind a brick wall, beyond a barrier
- Feeling like a prisoner
- Withdrawing
- Behind a curtain
- In a big, dark hole
- Feeling bombarded
- Feeling flooded
- Swallowed up by terror
- Feeling torn
- Holding yourself together
- Being stuck in a silent zone
- Like hiding
- Cutting self off
- Escaping

APPENDIX 2: WHAT DISSOCIATIVE EXPERIENCES ARE LIKE

Feeling disconnected was a common way in the interviews of describing dissociating. The disconnection could be from self, from surroundings, from others, from parts of their body, from feelings. Some participants have a mix of different kinds of dissociative experience and for others it is always the same kind of experiences each time it happens. Dissociating can happen at different levels of depth, and participants described how these experiences have tended to become less intense than they used to be earlier in life (e.g. in childhood) Further details are included in what follows below.

Intensely focussing

Concentrating on something (e.g. patterns on a carpet, counting, fixing gaze on a certain object) as a way of disconnecting from what is feeling overwhelming (e.g. a memory, an emotion).

Losing awareness of everything

Some participants describe completely losing awareness of everything when they dissociate – their surroundings, themselves, and other people. They can be times of blankness, in which there is no thought, no feeling, no sense of time or of the surrounding environment or of any other people; and then no memory of what happened during the dissociative episode.

Disconnecting from self

Other participants describe disconnecting only from themselves and not from other people. People with this kind of experience describe feeling parallel to themselves. It was common for people to describe not feeling connected to their bodies or to particular aspects of their body - for example, feeling they were separate from their voice (feeling that their voice is someone else's), or that their vision becomes affected in some way (like losing their sight). Some people reported that their body feels heavy and numb, and like it's not there.

Disconnecting from others, gradually dissociating

Other people feel far away and distant and it is as if those other people are the ones who have moved away. Moving away from the present moment, from people, from the environment, a gradual feeling of more distance from everything. Can feel like wandering thoughts, like not being able to focus or concentrate, feeling distracted, not able to follow conversation, forgetting what they are saying. It can be hard to talk and communicate, like words are hard to get hold of. Noises and movements can be disorienting, sometimes frightening, at these times.

Suddenly dissociating

Sudden dissociating tended to be because of a trigger or because of not feeling safe. Sometimes dissociative experiences are like flashbacks, going back into a memory and re-experiencing distressing events from the past. These flashbacks are visual memories, body memories, aural memories, and feeling memories. They can happen suddenly if something has been upsetting, or if there is a particular trigger (a word, or some other reminder of things connected with the abuse). Dissociative experiences

tend to be more intense and deep if the trigger is particularly upsetting. There can be a feeling of sudden exhaustion and sleepiness, and then the person dissociates.

The impact of dissociative experiences

These experiences can be exhausting in themselves, and at other times they can be brought on by tiredness. They can make people feel helpless, like they can't do anything to stop the experiences happening, and this can be frustrating. Some participants self-harm when they are dissociated and this is distressing and frightening. It can feel lonely to have these experiences. It can be very frightening for some people, because they are back in frightening experiences, or frightening because they feel so far from the present and so out of control of what is happening to them. It can be difficult to come back from dissociating and to realise time has passed, it can feel distressing. Sometimes the times of dissociating are times when the person can be feeling not blank but full of terror and hyper-vigilance. For some participants dissociating can feel like an escape from being trapped in difficult situations or difficult emotions. For other participants it is not an escape but a torment in itself because it takes them away from comfort and support available in the present.

What are dissociative experiences like when they happen specifically in counselling sessions?

For most participants, the form of dissociative experiences in counselling sessions is similar to how they are experienced outside of counselling sessions. For most participants they tend to be less prolonged and intense when they happen in counselling sessions. For some people, the experiences happen just as suddenly in therapy, and can last on beyond the end of the counselling session. Sometimes people stay aware of their counsellor and sometimes not. Sometimes these are flashbacks that happen without warning, something is triggered and the person goes back into a memory. Sometimes people choose to disconnect from the present and from their counsellor to enable them to go into a particular memory.

APPENDIX 3: WHAT CAUSES DISSOCIATIVE EXPERIENCES

- **Not feeling safe**
Dissociating can be linked to not feeling safe; if a person doesn't feel safe they dissociate
- **Being triggered by memory of abuse**
Sometimes dissociation happens because of a trigger that is connected with the abuse (a word, a sound, an image, for example). Usually when this happens the dissociating is sudden
- **Struggling to believe the reality of the abuse**
For some participants it has been extremely difficult to believe that someone who should have taken care of them had actually abused them and it has taken a long time for them to accept their memories as true. Struggling with the terrible reality of being abused by a caregiver has caused some participants to dissociate, often by disconnecting from the part of themselves that is telling about the abuse (for example, feeling like the voice that is telling of abuse is someone else's)
- **Difficulty of talking about abuse**
Being in counselling can sometimes make dissociative experiences happen because of the subject matter of the sessions, especially when people are talking about the abuse. Sometimes people disconnect from their therapist purposefully so that they can go into a memory and connect with their experiences from the past. Remembering words and blaming by the abuser can cause dissociation. Sometimes, when people are talking about childhood sexual abuse, they have been taken back into that past event as though it is happening now and they have become disconnected from the present. For some, dissociating is the only way of their being able to speak about the abuse without being overwhelmed
- **Worrying about what others (including their counsellor) are thinking or feeling**
Sometimes people are afraid that people might judge them. Some people disconnect from their true feelings in order to please others. Not being believed, or being afraid of not being believed, causes dissociating for some. In counselling sessions, the feeling of being vulnerable and exposed in front of a professional sometimes causes dissociative experiences
- **Having overwhelming emotions**
Dissociating can be a way of switching off painful feelings. Examples of the kinds of emotion that can be overwhelming and need to be shut down by dissociating: feeling ashamed, feeling isolated and excluded, feeling worthless, feeling afraid, feeling emotionally and physically exhausted. At these times, dissociating for some is like shutting out the world. It can also be something that allows the person to function in everyday life, by splitting off the part of them that is distressed and overwhelmed. When participants have experienced stress, some report that dissociating can stop the feeling of stress, but others report that dissociating can itself cause a continuation of the stress

- **Not feeling fully heard**
Some participants spoke of how feeling that their voice is not properly heard is a cause of dissociating
- **Not feeling enough empathy from the listener**
Not feeling fully understood and accepted can feel like being abandoned, and can lead to the people dissociating as a way of protecting themselves

APPENDIX 4: WHAT CAN BE HELPFUL

- Grounding and mindfulness techniques
- Breathing deeply and slowly
- Taking time to explore feelings and where they are located in the person's body, thus coming to understand bodily sensations and to hear what these reveal about experiences of abuse
- Quiet and calm environment
- Consistent boundaries
- Sensory experiences (e.g. touching objects, having pleasant things to smell)
- Physical proximity, sitting closer to the counsellor
- To have the counsellor hold their hand
- Knowing that the counsellor will be flexible when required (moving closer, helping the person to stand up and move around if they are getting stuck in dissociative experiences)
- It was important to most participants that they feel cared for and nurtured by their counsellor, and that their counsellor is warm and emotionally connected with them.

However, some participants felt that nothing could help them come back from dissociative experiences, that it was more a case of having to wait for them to pass.