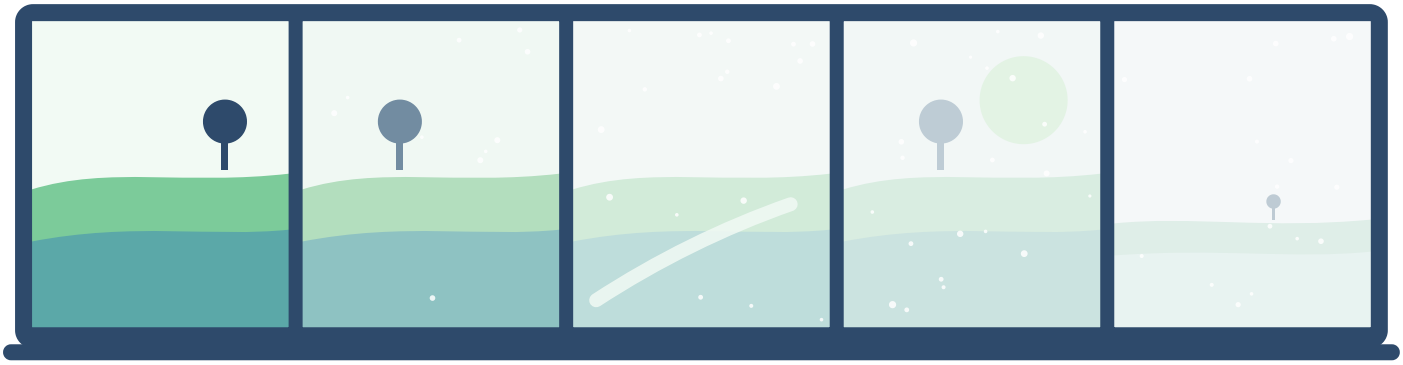
Dissociation: When You Feel Disconnected

Understand the experience. Recognise your signs. Find your way back to the present.

Most people feel disconnected now and then, especially when tired or stressed; brief episodes of feeling unreal are common (Hunter et al., 2004). For some people, particularly after overwhelming experiences, disconnection happens more often or feels more intense. This guide describes what may be happening, helps you notice your own signs, and offers gentle ways back. It is not a diagnostic tool.



here and now — *a little foggy* — *numb, going blank* — *unreal, behind glass* — *far away*

more connected → more disconnected

Many people describe disconnection as seeing the world through misted glass. Even when it feels far away, the present is still there, and there are gentle ways to find your way back to it.

01 What disconnection can feel like

you might recognise some, all or none

Unreal or detached from myself

As if watching yourself, or as if your body isn't quite yours.

"I'm on autopilot."

The world feels distant

Surroundings seem dreamlike, flat or unfamiliar.

"Like being behind glass."

Going blank

Losing track of a conversation, or your mind seeming to empty.

"Sorry, where was I?"

Emotionally numb

Feelings muted, or disconnected from what's around you.

"I know I should feel something."

Gaps in memory

Losing track of time, or not recalling what happened.

"Where did the hour go?"

02 Understanding the difference

not every disconnected feeling is dissociation

ORDINARY DISTRACTION

Drifting attention

Daydreaming, or driving a familiar route on "autopilot". Common, and usually easy to come back from.

part of everyday life

EMOTIONAL NUMBNESS

Feelings turned down

Emotions feel muted or flat, while awareness of your surroundings stays mostly clear. Can happen with stress, low mood or after trauma.

feelings, rather than awareness

SHUTDOWN

Whole-body low energy

When overwhelmed, the body may slow down: heavy, flat, hard to move or speak (Ogden et al., 2006).

a whole-body response to overwhelm

DISSOCIATION

A break in connection

A disruption in how thoughts, feelings, memory, the body, sense of self or surroundings usually fit together (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

e.g. feeling unreal, or memory gaps

These experiences can overlap and blend into each other. Feeling disconnected does not automatically mean dissociation, and only a qualified professional can assess what is happening for you. During or after overwhelming experiences, disconnection may be one way the mind protects itself (Lanius et al., 2010).

Why it can happen

When something feels too much and escape isn't possible, the mind may create distance as a form of protection.

Why it can linger

Once it has helped, the mind may reach for it again, sometimes in response to reminders, stress or exhaustion.

It isn't a choice

Disconnection is not weakness or "not trying". It is an automatic response, and with time it can become easier to notice and shift.

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03 Recognising my personal signs

notice, without judging

My thoughts
what happens to my thinking?

- ○ slow or foggy
- ○ blank
- ○ hard to follow
- ○ racing, then empty

My body
what do I feel, or not feel?

- ○ heavy
- ○ numb
- ○ floaty
- ○ far away
- ○ tingling

My attention
where does it go?

- ○ staring
- ○ lost time
- ○ missed what was said
- ○ zoned out

My sense of connection
to myself, others and the world

- ○ unreal
- ○ detached
- ○ behind glass
- ○ alone

What tends to come before it?
places, people, reminders, tiredness, stress

My earliest warning sign
the first thing I notice

04 Finding my way back to the present

four kinds of grounding to try

1 The environment
- ☐ Look around slowly; name five things I can see
- ☐ Say where I am, and today's date
- ☐ Notice colours, light and shapes

2 Movement
- ☐ Press my feet into the floor
- ☐ Stand, stretch or walk
- ☐ Squeeze and release my hands

3 The senses
- ☐ Hold something with texture
- ☐ A strong, pleasant smell or taste
- ☐ Cool water on my hands

4 Connection
- ☐ Talk with someone I trust
- ☐ Hear a familiar, calm voice
- ☐ Send a message to a safe person

GO GENTLY Different techniques suit different people. Grounding approaches such as Seeking Safety encourage keeping your eyes open and focusing on the present (Najavits, 2002). For some people, slow breathing or focusing inward can deepen disconnection. If anything increases distress, stop and try something else.

What helps me most

What doesn't help me

05 Knowing when to seek help

these experiences deserve care

Consider speaking with a GP or mental health professional if:

- episodes are frequent, long-lasting or distressing
- it is affecting work, study, relationships or daily life
- it started suddenly, or alongside new physical symptoms
- there are gaps in memory, or time you can't account for
- it happens while driving or in other situations where safety matters
- you would simply like to understand what is happening

Similar experiences can also come from medical conditions, medication, substances or lack of sleep, which is why a careful assessment matters.

If you feel unsafe If you are having thoughts of harming yourself, or feel at risk right now, please contact your local emergency number or a crisis line straight away.

06 Reflection

only if it feels okay to reflect

Something I want to remember

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