

DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER

SIGNS & TREATMENT



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Introduction

Dissociative identity disorder is a severe distortion of mental processes, creating a disconnect between an individual's thoughts, memories and feelings. Dissociative identity disorder was previously known as multiple personality disorder. The diagnosis is still somewhat controversial as researchers learn more about this disorder.

Dissociative identity disorder begins to develop in a child in the early stages of development. Research suggests that children ages 10 and younger will develop signs and symptoms of a dissociative disorder. However, less than 1% of the US population has been diagnosed with a dissociative disorder. WebMD states that between .01% and 1% of the general population is affected with dissociative identity disorder.

The Difference Between a Dissociative Event and a Disorder

Many Americans have experienced a mild form of dissociation. Dissociative events could include daydreaming and getting lost in the moment. Have you ever been driving your car on a usual route and suddenly realized you don't remember a portion of the drive? This is an extremely mild experience of dissociation.

Dissociative identity disorder is a severe form of dissociation. An individual with a dissociative disorder may experience episodes in varying severity- from not being able to feel their body, to having over 15 different personalities. Dissociative identity disorder severely impairs the life and development of the teen suffering from the disorder.

What Causes Dissociative Identity Disorder in Children and Teens

The exact cause of dissociative disorders in children is still unknown. However, researchers have identified a variety of factors that aid in the development of the disorder. Paradigm Malibu states that dissociative identity disorder is thought to stem from a combination of:

- [Traumatic Experience](#) (to self or observed)
- Physical Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- [Sexual Abuse](#)
- Chronic Neglect
- Chronic [Bullying](#)
- Natural Disaster
- Repeated Abandonment
- Witnessing Violence

Severe trauma and abuse in children, leading to dissociative identity disorder is typically extreme and repetitive. This is especially true for sexual and emotional abuse. Children dealing with extreme trauma or negative stimuli will often dissociate as a form of coping mechanism.

Types of Dissociation in Teens

The International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) describe the intensity of a dissociative disorder as ranging from normal to problematic to mild, moderate, and severe (according to Paradigm Malibu).

Dissociative disorders in teens often occurs as a result of trauma. Trauma will not always leave lasting effects on the teen once the events have passed. The likelihood of developing a disorder from trauma depends on the teen's psychological makeup, residence, conditioning, the severity of the event, and other factors. Trauma can also lead to other mental illnesses and disorders such as [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#), [anxiety](#), [depression](#) and [bipolar disorder](#).

Normal: Many examples of dissociation in children and teenagers is considered normal. For example, a teen may become engrossed in an art project and block out the rest of the room. Another child may read a book, blocking out anything going on around him. Children may live in a world of fantasy from time to time, but the child will be able to recognize what is real and what is fantasy. Any type of dissociation outside of the 'normal' categorization is considered to be problematic. Dissociation will cause issues in a teen's ability to function (whether mild or severe).

Mild: A mild form of dissociation would include a student or teen who has 'spaced out.' Staring out into space, obviously unaware of their surroundings and environment, is a dissociative act. While this may seem harmless, mild dissociative disorders can interrupt and inhibit learning for children and teens.

Moderate: Two forms of dissociative disorder fall under the moderate level. These forms include depersonalization and de-realization.

Depersonalization: Often referred to as an 'out of body' experience, depersonalization is the feeling of being detached or separated from one's body. Oftentimes a teen experiencing depersonalization cannot feel their own body. This often results from physical or sexual abuse. The body is also capable of blocking out other senses such as seeing, hearing, or tasting.

De-realization: De-realization is the feeling that the world is not real. The world or life may feel foggy or distant from the teen. This can happen during a traumatic event, or when the teen is reminded of that event taking place.

Severe: Severe dissociation can occur in both children and teens, but is much more common in adults. This type of dissociation occurs when trauma is too much for the individual to bear. As a coping mechanism, the child or teen will remove themselves completely from feelings concerning the trauma (physically and emotionally). During this level of severity, dissociative identity disorder

(DID) occurs and the individual will take on varying alternative personalities in order to deal with life.

Symptoms of Dissociative Disorders in Teenagers

Dissociative disorders may look different in children and teens than it does in adults, as young children have not yet developed the full scope of symptoms of the disorder. Because of this, early recognition and treatment is preferred.

Dissociative identity disorder (DID) is the presence of one or more distinct identities (also called split identities or personality states). These identities have power over the individual's behavior. The individual may not be able to recall extensive personal information about themselves. The individual's memories will be very distinct, but different depending on the identity that is being acted out.

When an individual has more than 1 personality, each 'alter' has its own age, gender, race, posture, gestures, and way of speaking. Alternative personalities can be imaginary people, animals, etc. An individual will 'switch' from one personality to another. This switching can occur in seconds, minutes, or even days.

In addition to experiencing dissociation or multiple personalities, an individual with dissociative identity disorder may also experience other mental health issues. These issues include:

- [Depression](#)
- [Anxiety Disorders](#)
- Mood Swings
- Desire for Self-persecution
- [Suicidal Thoughts or Tendencies](#)
- [Sleep Disorders](#)
- Hallucinations
- [Eating Disorders](#)
- [Alcohol Abuse](#)
- [Drug Abuse](#)

Less severe symptoms of dissociative identity disorder include:

- Headaches
- Amnesia
- Time Loss
- Trances
- Out of Body Experiences

Treatment for Dissociative Disorders

Children and Teens who suffer from identity dissociation (in one form or another) should seek treatment. Keep in mind that dissociation in children and teens will be less severe than in adults. In fact, it is rare (although possible) to see a severe level of dissociation in a teen or child.

There is no cure for dissociative identity disorder. Because DID is often accompanied by other mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and [PTSD](#), some patients with DID may be prescribed medication. These medications, however, are for these complementary conditions.

For teens and children in the early stages of developing dissociative identity disorder, their symptoms may be confused with other behavioral disorders. However, it is important that treatment is sought in order to aid the child or teen in adapting and learning healthy coping mechanisms.