

Not Real: A Peek into Dissociative Disorders

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It happens without warning. Sometimes in times of stress, but mostly during the mundane. The woosh. The camera pans, and the world is suddenly a frightening technicolor. Colors are too bright in the wrong way. Your depth perception shifts and the world is suddenly too close yet miles out of reach. You feel nothing but terror coursing through your blood and numbness conquering your limbs. The once familiar faces around you are contorted and unrecognizable. You feel like you're floating away while trapped in your own existence. You are here, and you are not. It's a hellish and tangible dream. You watch yourself like a rat in a maze of traps. You can watch but you can't interfere. You're not really real, remember?

This is, in part, how dissociation feels to me. Symptoms include, but are not limited to: being separated from yourself, memory loss, being detached from your surroundings, and feeling like you are not real. These things are true but they don't fully capture how it feels in the moment. How do you explain that you are not real and reality is inaccessible when you're standing right in it? The world turns, and you are stuck in place, watching yourself watch yourself, unable to participate. You see your life through a distorted, dreamlike lens. How do you accurately explain that you do not, in fact, exist in this moment that you are currently occupying?

We are made up of our own experiences and those of our ancestors. This is true on a biological level thanks to epigenetics, but this is also true spiritually. Those who come before us pass down pieces of themselves, handing us jagged bits of glass that we carefully glue down into the mosaic of our existence. As we experience life we add our own bits to the pattern. We interlace past and present together, mixing the beautiful and the ugly, the sharp and the smooth, weaving the intricate portrait of who we are.

However, dissociation obscures that image, zooming you out so far that you are a speck of who you used to be. You lose touch with the mosaic and the pieces are unrecognizable. The

fragments of who you are fade away and you are left a shell of a person, just waiting for it to end. All you feel are the barbed edges that remain. You're left trapped with the ghosts of the past, unable to connect with the present.

My longest dissociative episode lasted an entire summer. My memory of the time is a hazy blend of cigarette smoke, fantasy novels, and catatonic isolation. I sat on my mother's porch for hours on end, reading and watching the flowers grow, then bloom, then die. It was hard to speak or move as the world around me swirled into a dizzying, psychedelic fog. I could see the real world, sit in, but was never truly a part of it. Chain smoking menthols was the only thing keeping one foot anchored to earth.

I somehow managed to hold down a job during this time. I was hanging on by a thread, trying desperately to hide my symptoms, and failing miserably. I would forget what I was assisting customers with as I was helping them. My boss would try to tell me about her weekend, but I couldn't hear a thing as I watched her facial features move from their assigned position into a new, horrifying arrangement. On my commute home, the roads would start breathing and the lines would bend and shapeshift. The whole experience felt like a continuously bad drug trip.

Friendships and relationships fractured. It's hard to love someone who is not real, and when their new favorite pastime is staring off into the middle distance. It's difficult to give love when you're not sure if this is all a dream. Casual friends fell away, and my close friends were at a loss as to how to help. They did their best but unfortunately, it's an inescapable rollercoaster I had to ride alone.

I was horrified and numb. I was scared of the world around me but unable to feel the ground beneath me. My existence itself suffocated me as it left me cornered into the most remote

recesses of my brain. There was no escaping the labyrinth of my mind as I tried to navigate one moment to the next. I was swimming against the current of reality just to find myself washed up on the shores of delusion, gasping for air.

I don't know what triggered it. For me, it usually comes in waves but that summer it hit me like a monsoon, never relenting. I tried desperately to communicate with those around me what was happening, but the words were stuck in my throat. I was internally screaming for help, but all I could do was stare at the wall, waiting for the ebb. My support system did everything they could for me, and I will forever be thankful, but how do you bring someone back down to a world they are no longer a part of?

Dissociation is usually caused by some sort of long term traumatic event, such as war, prolonged abuse, catastrophic events, and childhood neglect. It's a way for your brain to separate your body from the Bad Thing happening. It's a defense mechanism your brain uses to remove the sense of self from the situation. Think of the phrase, "out of body experience". It can be helpful in the moment, but can morph into disorders that completely interrupt your life. The problem with a dissociative disorder is that the feeling happens well past the Bad Thing. The feeling can last anywhere from moments to years. It's a mental illness that isn't discussed much, I think, because it's so rare. According to the Cleveland Clinic, only about 2% of people in the United States suffer from some form of dissociation. I believe the number is under-reported, because the split from reality can be so hard to explain.

Dissociative disorders come in different forms, but my personal flavor happens to be derealization. With dissociation often comes a host of comorbidities, including PTSD, anxiety, and depression. These delightful additions add to an already debilitating disorder. It can be an

isolating experience as you come face to face with the devils inside you, fighting for your right to breathe.

Within the last decade or so, mental health has become much less stigmatized. Mental health and wellness have broken into the mainstream, touting ads and social media posts advertising pop psychology and self care as a cure all to one's anxiety and depression. Journal. Mediate. Go to therapy. You will beat this because almost everyone struggles with anxiety and depression at some point in their lives, to some extent, and they turned out just fine. It's okay to have mental illness as long as you don't exhibit any symptoms and don't have one of the "scary ones". Support is more publicly accessible.

For those of us with more severe diagnoses, the acceptance and public compassion fades. Unfortunately, dissociation often renders you dysfunctional. How can you drive when the roads seem like their breathing? How can you focus at work with holes in your memory? How can you build relationships when you're not sure if the person is actually in front of you? The world doesn't view the defective with much kindness. It fears what it doesn't understand.

These days, we do have hope. With the right cocktail of medications and an awful lot of therapy, there is relief. But for me, it never fully goes away. It always bubbles under the surface, waiting for me to slip up. The monster is always watching with teeth bared and claws sharpened, just looking for an opportunity to snatch me away from the here and now.

So I tell my story with my full chest. I shout from rooftops, begging to be seen and understood. I am a spectator to my own life, watching from a distance, craving the spotlight before the curtains close. One day I will stand in my light and take control of my own narrative. I hope, dear

reader, this has brought you closer to the experience. I hope to be seen and to be heard. I hope one day to feel and remain forever, real.