WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND







TEENS WHO DISSOCIATE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

WHAT IS DISSOCIATION?

Dissociation is a common trauma response in children and young people. It helps them survive when things feel unbearable by disconnecting from thoughts, feelings, the body, or surroundings. While this strategy may have been protective at the time, ongoing dissociation can interfere with relationships, learning, memory, emotional regulation, and identity development. A person can experience dissociation without meeting the criteria for dissociation disorder. As a clinician, understanding and treating dissociation is crucial to helping a child recover and thrive.

WHAT DOES DISSOCIATION LOOK LIKE IN THERAPY?

Children and teens who dissociate may:

Seem spaced out, confused, or "not really there".

Switch between emotional states and identities.

Report "inner people" or voices telling them what to do.

Forget sessions or not remember what was discussed.

Use different names, voices, or mannerisms.

Have trouble staying grounded or making eye contact.

Show unexplained physical symptoms or pain.



Behave like a much younger child during sessions.

WHY TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE MATTERS.

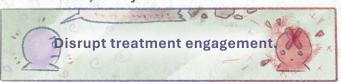
Dissociation is a survival response. Therapy must prioritise safety, choice, predictability, and trust.

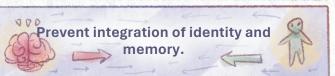
TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE INCLUDES:

- Building strong therapeutic rapport by being warm, respectful, and consistent
- Supporting regulation before exploration-help children feel safe before talking about trauma
- Avoiding re-traumatisation (e.g. not forcing disclosures or rushing trauma narratives)
- Understanding behaviours as adaptations, not defiance or pathology
- Providing psychoeducation on trauma and dissociation, using age-appropriate language
- Collaborating with caregivers, schools, and other professionals to build a network of safety

WHY TREATMENT MUST TARGET DISSOCIATION DIRECTLY.

Dissociation won't always resolve on its own, even with trauma-focused treatment. If left unaddressed, it may:







Increase risk of self-harm, revictimisation, and poor functioning.

DIRECTLY ADDRESSING DISSOCIATION CAN INCLUDE:

- Teaching children how to recognise when they're dissociating
- Introducing grounding strategies early and practising them often
- Identifying dissociative parts and their functions, and respectfully working on enhancing communication between these parts to help the child function better
- Helping the child feel safe in the present (e.g. differentiating past from now)
- Supporting integration of memory, identity, emotion, and experience

USE EVIDENCE-BASED TRAUMA TREATMENTS

Research shows that trauma-specific therapies reduce symptoms of dissociation when properly adapted. Recommended treatments include:



Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT):

- Well-supported for use with children and adolescents
- Should be adapted when dissociation is present by including more preparation and a greater focus on emotion regulation
- Use gradual exposure carefully and only when the child can stay present

Other evidence-informed approaches may include:

- Parent-child dyadic therapy focusing on safe, healthy attachment
- Play therapy
- EMDR (adapted for children with dissociative and complex trauma)
- Creative therapies that include grounding and stabilisation



TRAINING AND RESOURCES FOR WORKING WITH DISSOCIATION.

Working with dissociation requires specialist knowledge and confidence. Consider additional training with:

- International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) -www.isst-d.org
- Arianne Struik The Institute for Chronically Traumatized Children (www.ariannestruik.com)
- Catherine Hayes Complex Trauma Psychology (www.complextraumapsychology.com)



These trainers offer practical, evidence-based methods for working with dissociative children and adolescents.

FINAL NOTE.

"Children who dissociate are doing their best to survive. With the right support, they can reconnect, regulate, and heal. As a therapist, your role is to guide them gently, patiently, and with deep respect for their strengths and their story."

