UNDERSTAND DISSOCIATION IN







YOUNG PEOPLE A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

WHAT IS DISSOCIATION?

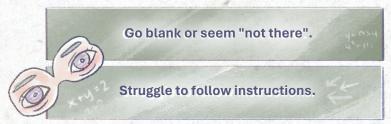
Dissociation is when a student disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, or surroundings. It's a common automatic survival response to trauma: when a person is unable to cope with something overwhelming, they 'dissociate' (mentally 'check out') from the situation.

Students who dissociate might seem spaced out, zoned out, or like a different version of themselves.



WHAT MIGHT YOU NOTICE IN THE CLASSROOM?

Students who dissociate may:



Drift off mid-task or during discussions.

Suddenly freeze or stop responding.

Seem confused or forgetful.

Act in a way that seems much younger than their age.



Say things like "I don't remember" or "it's like

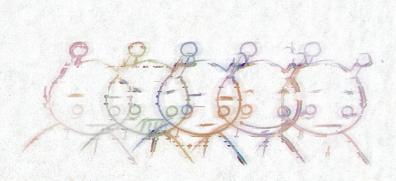
I disappeared".

These behaviours are often linked to places that feel unsafe or remind them of the past. For example, a student who experiences dissociative behaviours at school may not experience it at home- parents might not see what you see!



The brain uses dissociation to protect the person during or after overwhelming experiences. It can be triggered by reminders of past trauma, stress, or emotional overload, even in safe environments like school or in response to ordinary things like being asked a question in the classroom.







HOW CAN YOU HELP?



DO NOT:

- Call out or embarrass the student for zoning out or "not paying attention."
- Label them as lazy, rude, or defiant. Dissociation can look like disengagement but is not intentional.
- Pressure them to explain what happened during or after a dissociative episode.
- Assume they are being disrespectful if they don't respond right away or seem distant.
- Use yelling or harsh discipline, which can increase dissociation or trigger trauma responses.



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- Speak gently, use the student's name, and orient them to the present: "You're okay. You're at school. I'm here."
- Stay calm and non-judgemental your tone matters more than your words.
- Don't ask lots of questions in the moment; keep language simple and supportive.
- Be patient if the student seems slow to respond, confused, or "checked out." Give them time to reengage.
- •If you notice dissociation (e.g. blank stare, no response, sudden slumping), gently redirect attention without pressure.
- Afterward, check in privately and acknowledge what you noticed: "You seemed like you drifted off a bit, are you okay?"
- Create a predictable and calm classroom environment. Support transitions with warnings or countdowns.
- Follow the student's regulation plan (if they have one) and allow breaks when needed options like a movement break, calming space, or quiet activity can help.
- Check in privately if you notice unusual behaviour, with gentle prompts like: "Are you okay?" or "Do you need a break?"
- Use inclusive, trauma-informed practices assume students are doing the best they can based on their experiences.
- Collaborate with families and support staff to understand the student's needs and triggers.

WHAT ACCOMODATIONS THE STUDENT MAY NEED:

- Extra time on tasks or assessments
- Ability to leave class to take a break or visit a quiet, low-sensory wellbeing space
- Permission to sit near a trusted adult or near the door
- Clear, written instructions in addition to verbal ones
- Reduced sensory stimulation (quiet spaces, soft lighting, headphones)
- Access to grounding tools in the classroom that aren't distracting to other students (stress ball, weighted lap pad, etc.)
- Consistent routine and advance notice of changes
- A calm, non-punitive response to confusion, zoning out, or emotional changes

WORKING WITH OTHERS.

- Let the wellbeing team or school psychologist know what you're noticing.
- Work with the student and their caregivers to create a support plan.
- Recognise that healing takes time and school can be a key place of safety.

FINAL NOTE.

"Dissociation is not defiance or rudeness, rather it's the nervous system doing its best to protect us. Your calm presence and understanding can make a huge difference."



