

# Understanding and Treating Depersonalization

## Objective

To understand how depersonalization is affecting your life and identify techniques to address it.

## You Should Know

Depersonalization is a subjective experience in which you perceive yourself as 'unreal,' and you may experience this if you have been subjected to temporary anxiety or stress. Chronic depersonalization may occur if you have experienced a severe trauma, or if you have been exposed to prolonged stress or anxiety. However, it can also be a symptom in a number of other disorders. It is characterized by an alteration in the perception or experience of the self, where you feel detached from, and as if you are an outside observer of, your mental processes or body (e.g., feeling as if you are in a dream).

If you have ever experienced intense stress or witnessed a traumatic event such as war, abuse, serious accident, disasters, or extreme violence, you may experience one or more of the following:

- A split between your mind and body - sensations, feelings, emotions, or behaviors feel like they are not your own.
- Feeling stiff, like a robot or machine; feeling waxy and disoriented in space and time.
- A detachment within your personality, as if different parts of you do not fit with each other.
- You might feel as a detached observer of yourself, like you are watching your life being lived without you taking part in it.
- You might feel that you have changed so much that this new person is not you.
- Your name might seem strange, not belonging to you when somebody calls you.
- You might use the stereotypical perception of the self as an example of some defining social category, e.g., soldier, truck driver, or housewife.
- You do not understand your symptoms; they do not make sense.

## What to Do

Read through the 30 statements. Mark each statement with either Yes if it is true for you, or No if it is not true for you. Then, for each statement you marked Yes, choose the appropriate number in the Frequency and Duration columns.

	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Frequency</b> 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = often, 3 = very often, 4 = all the time	<b>Duration</b> 1 = several seconds, 2 = several minutes, 3 = a few hours, 4 = one day, 5 = several days, 6 = more than one week
1	I feel hollow and empty inside.				
2	I feel like I have lost my sense of myself.				
3	I feel like I am observing myself from the outside, looking inside.				
4	I feel like an automaton or robot.				
5	My head feels empty, without thoughts.				
6	I stopped laughing, crying, and feeling pain as I used to.				
7	My body feels very light.				
8	I don't feel anything in dangerous situations.				
9	I am paying a lot of attention to my bodily sensations and/or my thoughts.				
10	My body and mind seem disconnected.				
11	I don't enjoy anything, have no favorite meal, music, or sport.				

12	Parts of my body are not mine.				
13	Suddenly, I feel strange and detached.				
14	I feel flat and lifeless.				
15	My belly is tight.				
16	Familiar voices feel unreal.				
17	I feel parts of my body getting larger or smaller.				
18	I hallucinate.				
19	I feel suicidal.				
20	I feel like hurting other people and being revengeful.				
21	When I look at my reflection in the mirror, I see another person.				
22	My perceptions of time and space have changed.				
23	I have sleeping problems and/or nightmares.				
24	I fear I might be going crazy.				
25	I don't feel any affection toward my family and friends.				
26	I feel like I am outside my body.				

27	I have to touch myself to feel real.				
28	I feel I have a physical illness that is not treated.				
29	I don't understand myself.				
30.	I am so alert, like I have overdosed on coffee.				

If you answered YES to statements 2, 3, 6, 10, 13, 16, 22, 25, 26, and 28, give yourself 10 points for each answer.

If you answered YES to statements 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 14, 15, 29, and 30, give yourself 20 points for each answer.

If you answered YES to statements 8, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, and 27, give yourself 30 points for each answer.

Add your score: \_\_\_\_\_

Now, for each frequency and duration marking, add as many points to the score as the number you put down in frequency and duration columns. For example, if you answered YES to statement 25, that is 10 points, you marked frequency as 3, and duration as 2. In total that is  $10+3+2=15$  points for statement 25. Do this for all 30 statements.

**Total Score:** \_\_\_\_\_

If your score is equal to or less than 200, then your trauma may be classified as MILD.

If your score is between 200 and 300, then your trauma may be classified as MEDIUM.

If your score is higher than 300, then your trauma may be classified as SEVERE.

*Please note that this questionnaire is neither the only one nor the best. Please consult other questionnaires.*

### **Treatment for Depersonalization**

Treatment depends on the underlying cause(s), and whether your depersonalization symptoms are predominantly organic or psychological in origin. If depersonalization is a symptom of neurological disease, then diagnosis and treatment of the specific disease is the first approach. Contact your physician. Also, if your score indicates that your trauma is severe, please contact your physician or seek help from a mental health professional as soon as possible.

If your depersonalization is mild to medium, you could try some of the following strategies and activities.

**1. Stay grounded no matter what!** During depersonalization, you might experience a wide range of thoughts and feelings. Some paradoxical, while some will feel familiar and connected to the events of your daily life. Some will be less familiar, upsetting, or strange to you. Mastering, containing, controlling, and communicating your feelings in an appropriate way might take time and learning, but once acquired, you will feel empowered and no longer lost in the moment.

**2. Learn to nurture yourself.** Learn about your physical and psychological needs. If it gets difficult, imagine you are taking care of somebody else, someone important to you. Eat, sleep, exercise, and fulfil all of your needs and wishes. Spiritual practice (this may be religious, but not necessarily) may help to sustain you on a daily basis.

**3. Maintain your boundaries.** Boundaries maintain your personal integrity. You might already know that you have the right to say “No” when somebody or something is crossing your boundaries. There might be things you do not want to do, experience, or communicate at that moment and at that place and time. Respectfully, kindly, and firmly say “No.” Other people might invade your space with the best of intentions. But you do not have to accept this. It is you who dictates how big the space around you should be and what goes in and out of that space. When you maintain your boundaries, you can actually deal with different people and different situations more effectively, feeling that you have more power and control over every situation.

**4. Be aware of your thoughts and emotions.** Learn how your sensory self is responding to different situations. Give those experiences a name, even if it is not a scientific or a common name. Remember your past experiences with each emotion. Know what triggers them. Understand other people who react that way. Does it apply to you? Are you satisfied with those reactions and experiences? Are you frustrated that you cannot adequately express yourself? What else do you need to learn?

**5. Create a strong support system.** These are the people who know, encourage, and nurture you. They like you for who you are, and they are willing to help you become your best self—people you can turn to just to listen and be there for you. They are the opposite of toxic people, who put you down, discourage you, manipulate you, and encourage you to be impulsive, revengeful, and hopeless.

**6. Create a psychological “toolbox.”** Create a place where you can keep your “coping skills.” It can be a box with pictures, drawings, poems, inspirational messages, or special memories. A storage place for your life management tools and strategies you have developed and used effectively to cope with past challenges. Be patient, and over time your personal “toolbox” will contain a lot. In challenging times, however, you may feel that you need to seek help to gain a broader perspective, and perhaps add more strategies in order to better deal with a certain situation. Anything that helps you grow and become more grounded is always a welcome addition to your toolbox.

## Selfie Diary

Here is another activity you can do to help with depersonalization. Take a selfie of yourself every day for at least ten consecutive days.

Selfie Day	Date/Time	Where were you?	What were the circumstances? Describe the situation in which you took the selfie.	When I took the selfie, I thought and felt:
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

If at all possible, print out your selfies and paste them on the following pages in the order in which they were taken.

*Paste selfie day 1 here.*

*Paste selfie day 2 here.*

*Paste selfie day 3 here.*

*Paste selfie day 4 here.*

*Paste selfie day 5 here.*

*Paste selfie day 6 here.*

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Paste selfie day 7 here.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Paste selfie day 8 here.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Paste selfie day 9 here.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Paste selfie day 10 here.</i></p>

Now, look at your selfies. Choose the one you like the most and describe it.

I took this selfie on \_\_\_\_\_ (morning/afternoon/evening/night) while I was \_\_\_\_\_ . I remember feeling \_\_\_\_\_ .

Looking at this selfie, I see myself as \_\_\_\_\_ and I feel \_\_\_\_\_. I choose this selfie as my favorite because \_\_\_\_\_ .

Now, choose the one you like the least and describe it.

I took this selfie on \_\_\_\_\_ (morning/afternoon/evening/night) while I was \_\_\_\_\_ . I remember feeling \_\_\_\_\_ .

Looking at this selfie, I see myself as \_\_\_\_\_ and I feel \_\_\_\_\_. I choose this selfie as my favorite because \_\_\_\_\_ .



Advice: Keep taking selfies, one a day. Copy the table and paste sheets and fill in the information about each selfie. On every tenth day, write two short descriptive paragraphs, one for your favorite selfie and one for your least favorite.

### Vigorous Physical Activity

Another approach to dealing with depersonalization is engaging in vigorous physical activity for which you are medically fit. Do this every other day for at least ten days or until you have done five activities. It is important to keep regularity in the rhythm of your activities. It does not have to be the same activity each time, though it can. After completing each activity, complete the following chart.

Activity Date	Type of activity and how long?	After completing the activity, my body and my muscles feel:	After completing the activity, I think and I feel:
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Now, answer the following questions.

Which type of activity made you feel most yourself? \_\_\_\_\_

Which type of activity made you feel like a stranger? \_\_\_\_\_

Is there any particular sensation that you felt during this activity? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you do the activity alone or you were with someone? \_\_\_\_\_

If you had company, how did the presence of the other person(s) make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Which of the activities you did would you consider doing on a regular basis? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

If you did the same activity every time, why? \_\_\_\_\_

What other activities would you consider doing? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Bathroom Exercise**

In order to address symptoms of depersonalization, experts suggest that you take a shower or bath every day for at least ten consecutive days. While doing so, pay attention to your thoughts and feelings before and after bathing. Every time you towel yourself dry, report to yourself (out loud) which part of your body you are towelng, for example, "I am towelng my left leg." Pay attention to sensations of your body as you are doing this. Describe the sensations, including what you are thinking and feeling. Write this down in the following chart.

	Before taking the shower/bath			After taking the shower/bath		
	Bodily sensations	Thoughts	Feelings	Bodily sensations	Thoughts	Feelings
Day 1						
Day 2						
Day 3						
Day 4						
Day 5						
Day 6						
Day 7						
Day 8						
Day 9						
Day 10						

## Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

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