

SECTION Mental Health Disorders
SUBJECT Amnesia and Related Disorders

Dissociative Amnesia

Dissociative amnesia is a type of amnesia caused by trauma or stress resulting in an inability to recall important personal information.

Dissociative amnesia is one type of amnesia. Amnesia is the total or partial inability to recall recent or remote experiences (see [Brain Dysfunction: Amnesia](#)). When amnesia is caused by a psychologic rather than a physical disturbance, it is called dissociative amnesia. Amnesia may also be a symptom of other disorders, such as acute stress disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, or somatization disorder.

In dissociative amnesia, the lost memory usually involves information that is normally part of routine conscious awareness or "autobiographical" memory—who one is; what one did; where one went; to whom one spoke; what was said, thought, and felt; and so on. Sometimes the information, though forgotten, continues to influence the person's behavior.

People with dissociative amnesia usually have one or more memory gaps spanning a few minutes to a few hours or days. However, memory gaps spanning years or even a person's entire life may occur. Most people with dissociative amnesia are aware that they have "lost some time," but some become aware of time loss only when they realize or are confronted with evidence that they have done things that they do not recall. Some people with dissociative amnesia forget some but not all events over a period of time; others cannot recall their entire previous life or forget things as they occur.

The disorder is most common among young adults, more commonly among people who have been involved in wars, accidents, or natural disasters. It may also block memories of childhood sexual abuse, later recalled in adulthood. Dissociative amnesia can occur for some time after a traumatic event. Whether such recovered memories reflect real events in the person's past remains unknown, unless confirmed by another person.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

The most common symptom of dissociative amnesia is memory loss. Shortly after becoming amnesic, a person may seem confused. Many people with dissociative amnesia are somewhat depressed or very distressed by their amnesia.

To make the diagnosis, the doctor carefully reviews the person's symptoms and performs a physical examination to exclude physical causes of amnesia. Tests, including electroencephalography and blood testing for toxins and drugs, are sometimes needed to exclude physical causes. A psychologic examination is also performed. Special psychologic tests often help the doctor better characterize and understand the person's dissociative experiences to develop a treatment plan.