What Is Derealization and How Do We Deal With It?

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Coping With Derealization Anxiety

Mayo Clinic defines depersonalization-derealization disorder as "when you persistently or repeatedly have the feeling that you're observing yourself from outside your body or you have a sense that things around you aren't real, or both." However, this can also occur, on occasion, with anxiety, such as during a panic attack.

I can remember the first time I experienced derealization. I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder almost three years ago, shortly after my son was born. However, I didn't experience the "out of body" experience of derealization and anxiety together until I suffered my first panic attack. I cannot remember the circumstances that sent me into the tailspin, but I remember how I felt. My heart began racing, I heard a loud buzzing in my ears, I began sweating, and my thoughts began racing. In short – I was certain I was dying.

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During my first panic attack, I felt as though the world I was in couldn't be real. How else could I feel this way when I had felt normal (anxious, but normal) minutes before?

Derealization — that's how.

Symptoms of Derealization

Derealization and anxiety are linked. The symptoms of derealization typically occur *with* anxiety. However, if they occur more frequently, they may be a sign of depersonalization-derealization disorder. Regardless, any of the following symptoms should be discussed with your physician:

- Distortions of distance, size, and shape of objects
- Distortions of time (ex: recent events feeling like distant past)
- Having an emotional disconnection from people to whom you are close
- Surroundings that are blurry, colorless, or two-dimensional, or an increased clarity of surroundings
- Feelings of alienation, like you are living in a movie

One important thing to understand about derealization — *derealization is a subjective symptom.* This means that the symptom is whatever the patient says it is; unlike measuring a patient's blood pressure or temperature, the symptom of derealization is unmeasurable.

What Is the Cause of Derealization?

It is a mystery, although there is a very compelling theory.

Derealization is thought to be a natural coping mechanism of the body. When the body is under intense stress, such as during a panic attack or other stress disorders, the mind basically "turns off" in order to cope with the stress. Because the mind has turned itself off, the world seems unreal.

Treatment for Derealization

Although derealization occurs often with panic attacks and anxiety, it can occur with a variety of other psychological conditions. Treatment first requires ruling out other conditions, such as schizophrenia, dissociative disorders, brain trauma, and substance use and abuse.

Initially, one need to treat the specific root of the disease or condition that is causing derealization. After that, other treatments can be utilized.

According to *GoodTherapy.org,* "people often benefit from learning self-soothing skills and may practice meditation, deep breathing, and other relaxation exercises. Medication can also help ease anxiety and people may be prescribed antidepressants and/or anti-anxiety medications ... When derealization is caused by a mental health condition, treatment almost always involves some form of psychotherapy. Therapy can address underlying causes of derealization, help with groundedness, and provide new coping skills."

Prevention Is Key

It is important to note that when derealization accompanies anxiety, it is not necessarily dangerous, although it is scary. When I have this symptom, I find it as bad as the panic attack itself.

I try to live my life in a way that will prevent both derealization and anxiety. Here are some of my tried-and-true ways to prevent anxiety:

- **Daily yoga practice**: Although I have been practicing yoga for over half of my life, I implemented a daily practice over the past year. This has decreased my anxiety substantially.
- **Walking**: My therapist told me to find some type of exercise I love to do and do it often. While yoga gives me the "mind-body" connection, walking is purely for the movement. I always feel better after a walk.
- **Writing**: I journal, especially when my anxiety is in high gear. When I can’t verbalize my feelings, writing them down is the next best thing.
- **Meditation**: I may sit on my couch, lie on my bed, or sit at my desk at work. I sit in complete silence or put in headphones. I simply do my best to quiet my mind. Sometimes I use a downloaded program to meditate (because let’s face it – when you have an anxious mind, meditating is hard) or I may think positive thoughts.