

Derealization

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Derealization

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Psychiatry, Clinical Neuroscience

1. Core Definition

Derealization is a profound and unsettling dissociative experience characterized by a persistent or recurrent feeling of **detachment** from one's immediate surroundings and environment. It is widely recognized as a significant symptom often associated with **panic and anxiety disorders**, manifesting as a perceptual alteration of reality rather than a loss of reality testing itself.

Individuals experiencing derealization frequently describe their mental state as foggy, akin to being in a dream, or feeling as though they are physically **trapped under a dome**, creating a distinct barrier between themselves and the external world. The essence of this experience is that the world around the individual appears unreal, distant, or lacks its usual vibrancy and authenticity, leading to a sense that the environment and the people within it do not truly belong to reality.

Those afflicted often articulate feeling profoundly "cut off" from the world, perceiving their surroundings as distinctly lacking in normal sensory attributes, such as **color and depth**, which contribute to a flattened or artificial appearance of reality. In some clinical presentations, the phenomenon of derealization can extend to other sensory modalities, leading to a disruption in the perception of **hearing or smell**, further contributing to the feeling of unreality and estrangement from one's environment.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the precise etymological roots of "derealization" are embedded in the broader psychological lexicon of dissociation, the concept gained significant clinical recognition within the fields of psychology and psychiatry as a distinct perceptual disturbance. Its understanding has evolved in tandem with the study of dissociative phenomena, differentiating it from other altered states of consciousness.

The clinical recognition of derealization as a specific symptom, particularly within the context of panic and anxiety disorders, underscores its importance in diagnostic frameworks. It is understood not merely as a vague feeling but as a specific alteration in the perception of external reality, distinct from depersonalization (detachment from oneself) but often co-occurring. Its inclusion in contemporary diagnostic criteria highlights its established place in the lexicon of mental health conditions as a significant, albeit often secondary, clinical presentation that warrants careful assessment and intervention.

3. Key Characteristics

A pervasive and often distressing feeling of **detachment** from one's physical surroundings and the broader environment.

Subjective descriptions of a **"foggy mental state,"** where cognitive clarity is impaired, or a sensation of being physically **"trapped under a dome."**

The profound perception that external surroundings, the environment, and other individuals appear **unreal**, artificial, or do not genuinely exist within reality.

Manifestation of sensory distortions, particularly the environment seeming to be devoid of its usual vividness, described as a lack of **color and depth**.

An overarching experience of feeling **"cut off"** or isolated from the world, as if an invisible barrier separates the individual from their external reality.

Potential disruption of other sensory perceptions, including anomalies in **hearing or smell**, which can further exacerbate the feeling of unreality.

4. Significance and Impact

Derealization holds significant clinical importance as a prominent symptom that can profoundly impact an individual's psychological well-being and daily functioning. Its prevalence as a manifestation of acute stress responses underscores its role as an indicator of psychological distress and often contributes substantially to the overall burden of anxiety and panic-related conditions.

The experience is most commonly and intensely observed during **panic attacks** or sustained periods of **high anxiety**, where the body's fight-or-flight response can trigger a cascade of psychological symptoms including perceptual distortions. In these instances, derealization can heighten the sense of fear and disorientation, making the anxiety experience even more distressing and challenging to manage.

Beyond its association with anxiety, derealization can also emerge in other clinical scenarios, notably when certain psychotropic medications are discontinued. It has been observed to occur in some cases when **antidepressants are no longer being taken** by a patient, suggesting a potential role for neurochemical imbalances or withdrawal effects in its etiology. The persistence of derealization can lead to significant distress, impair social interactions, and diminish one's overall quality of life by eroding the fundamental sense of being connected to and grounded in reality.

5. Debates and Criticisms

The provided content focuses primarily on the symptomatic description and clinical manifestations of derealization, rather than delving into specific academic debates or criticisms concerning the

concept itself. The text offers a clear, descriptive account of what derealization entails and under what circumstances it commonly arises, positioning it as a recognized psychological phenomenon.

In broader academic and clinical discourse, however, discussions around derealization often revolve around its classification, differential diagnosis, and underlying neurobiological mechanisms. While not explicitly detailed in the source, these areas include differentiating derealization from psychotic experiences (where reality testing is lost) and understanding whether it functions primarily as a symptom of other disorders (e.g., anxiety, PTSD) or as a core component of a distinct dissociative disorder, such as Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder (American Psychiatric Association). Such discussions contribute to refining diagnostic criteria and developing more targeted therapeutic interventions, although these specific debates are not elaborated upon in the provided material.

Further Reading

American Psychiatric Association - Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder