

I was terrified when my mind detached from my body – this is depersonalisation

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On holiday with my family, I looked in the mirror and saw a stranger. Somehow, my brain can pull me apart and put me back together again. ‘Slowly, I had faded away. I could see my reflection from what felt like the ceiling.’

You’re staring straight ahead. Somehow your awareness peels away from you, in slow motion. It’s like you’ve cracked in two, and one half is facing the wrong way. Are you in your physical body, which you know must still be there? Before you know it, you’re up on the ceiling somewhere, watching yourself down below.

Depersonalisation disorder: the condition you’ve never heard of that affects millions

One in 50 of us is a victim, left feeling like a robot – and yet even doctors have to Google it. Now one sufferer is intent on helping millions out of their torment.

I’ve read that depersonalisation is one of the body’s stress responses. You can’t deal with a situation, so it almost ejects you, makes you feel disconnected. Which would be amazing, if it wasn’t so awful. When it first happened to me – to this extreme, at least – I was on holiday with my dad, sister and brother. Something felt off, uncomfortable. I’d been feeling anxious and out of sorts all week, so I went back to the hotel room in the middle of the day. I remember feeling I couldn’t stay still. Things weren’t right. I paced around the hotel room in the heat, wearing my bikini. Pacing was good. I was doing something, and something had to be done.

After a while I walked into the bathroom and looked at my body in the mirror. It seemed alien to me. Hairy, covered in sweat and fat, and then I looked up and saw my face. That’s when I knew I wasn’t in there any more. That face wasn’t mine. To tell you the truth, I couldn’t have told you if I’d seen it before. It was the face of a stranger. Slowly, I had faded away. I could see my reflection from what felt like the ceiling.

I can’t remember thinking anything specific about what might be happening. I just felt fear. Somehow I got to my bed, and I lay there. I stayed in my room when my family went out for dinner. By the time they came back, I wasn’t in the air anymore. But I still didn’t really feel there. My hands weren’t mine. They just weren’t mine. I needed to tell someone, but who would believe it?

When someone spoke to me, it felt like I was far away, or watching everything happen to someone else

The next two days were spent on a lounge with my sunglasses on and eyes shut. I listened to The Beautiful and Damned audiobook from start to finish, focusing as best I could on each word the irritating narrator spoke, trying to paint pictures on my eyelids instead. Whenever I opened my eyes, nothing

looked or felt right. When someone spoke to me, it felt like I was far away, or watching everything happen to someone else. It took a couple of days to finally shake it off and feel like I'd "returned" to my body.

It's happened again, a fair few times, to varying degrees and for varying periods of time. Thankfully, it usually skips the leaving-the-body bit, and goes straight to an uneasy dysphoria. Sometimes it's more a vague sense of not really being there, like you're walking around looking out of a goldfish bowl. It's happened for me during a period of severe anxiety, after a panic attack, as it can for many people, but mostly when I'm having a bad patch with an ongoing health issue.

I've learned ways to pull myself in – to "ground" myself. I find it helpful to rub my hands together when they don't feel like mine. To screw myself up into a ball. If I'm at home, I'll sit on the floor and meditate in some way. Listening to ambient music helps. As does eating or drinking something mindfully, concentrating on every bite. Going for a long walk at a fast pace can sometimes help bring me back again. Everyone says it, but I avoid alcohol or coffee like the plague when I'm feeling on edge – they've often been a trigger. Telling people has been important too. I had to tell my sister what happened when we were on holiday, and now she knows I "go a bit weird" sometimes and I don't have to explain it all again if it comes on.

For me, it's a symptom. I always know I can pull through when it happens. I've read that some people feel like this for ever. There's a case of one old man who's had it since he looked down at his hands one day and realised they weren't his. I'm thankful that that's not me. The brain is powerful: I'm in awe of what it can create from thin air, the realities it can produce, that it can suddenly make me float up around the lampshade.

At some point in all this, it's necessary to try and build back trust in your own mind. I've spent hours wondering how my mind could pull me apart and put me back together again, make me feel everywhere and nowhere. It can take a real effort to reclaim the body you live in. To rub your arm and not have it seem like a dislocated alien arm, a mannequin. Depersonalisation – particularly a bad incident – makes you realise that the body is just a vessel with a brain, really. We couldn't do a single thing without what's going on up there. People talk about losing their minds, so it shouldn't be a big surprise that it's so easy to lose your body.