

# The Thousand-Yard Stare: What It Is and How to Cope

Definition | Psychology | In children | Takeaway

While it can be experienced by anyone, the “thousand-yard stare” is especially common in those who have experienced trauma in some way.

From our perception of the world around us to the way we feel within ourselves, trauma can affect us in many ways. We can feel it mentally as anxiety, exhaustion, and numbness – or physically as sleep problems and long-term health conditions.

But even though trauma can sometimes feel invisible, there are outward signs, like the thousand-yard stare, for example. Often associated with [war veterans](#), this phrase describes the disconnected expression that can happen in people with combat or shell shock or other mental health conditions.

Ahead, we'll discuss what the thousand-yard stare is, the psychology behind this coping mechanism, and how to get treatment for frequent dissociation.

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## What is the “thousand-yard stare”?

The “[thousand-yard stare](#)” – or 1000-yard stare – is a term that describes the blank, emotionless expression that people sometimes experience with acute stress or [dissociation](#).

This phrase [originated](#) from a painting called “Marines Call It That 2,000 Yard Stare” by Tom Lea. Originally published in Life magazine in 1945, it depicts a World War II soldier standing in front of a charred battleground while staring blankly ahead with a detached gaze.

Over time, the phrase “the thousand-yard stare” became synonymous with combat shock or shell shock in [military personnel](#). However, it can also describe the same emotionless expression that people with trauma may experience during episodes of dissociation.

When someone has the thousand-yard stare, they:

- might have a detached, unfocused, or emotionless expression on their face
- might be zoned out and unaware of what’s happening around them
- may not be responsive to what you’re doing or saying

## The psychology of the thousand-yard stare

In the same way that our [stress response](#) prepares our bodies to fight or flee, dissociation is another type of response to stress. But unlike the fight-or-flight response, dissociation is more [psychological](#) in nature.

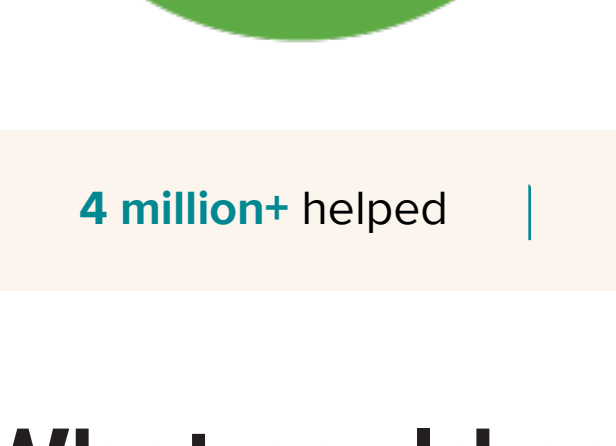
Dissociation can affect someone’s perception, consciousness, memory, identity, and even motor control. It exists on a spectrum, with experiences ranging from mild dissociation like zoning out to more severe disorders like [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#) and [dissociative identity disorder \(DID\)](#).

When someone is dissociated, it can cause them to feel detached from themselves or the world around them. They might also experience feelings of physical and emotional numbness, or have flashbacks, all of which can cause them to appear unfocused, disconnected, or zoned out.

Several [mental health conditions](#) can cause someone to experience frequent episodes of dissociation.

For example, both [acute stress disorder](#) and acute stress response [can cause](#) someone to appear dazed, confused, or in a stupor.

Dissociation is also a [documented symptom](#) of PTSD, [borderline personality disorder \(BPD\)](#), and other mental health disorders.



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## What could cause a thousand-yard stare in a child?

Children who experience overwhelming, frightening, or traumatic situations [may use dissociation](#) to cope with what they’re experiencing. Much like the thousand-yard stare in adults, children can appear numb and disconnected during these episodes.

In a [2017 study](#), researchers explored the common features of dissociative episodes in children exposed to traumatic events or situations.

Results of the study found that the most common symptoms in children during dissociative episodes included being spaced out or appearing shut down and distant. During these episodes, it was also common for children to be physically still and isolated from others.

Even though dissociation is a natural response to stress in children, it can be a frightening experience for both children and their parents. If you have a child who is experiencing frequent dissociation, consider reaching out to their doctor or [a pediatric therapist](#) to discuss treatment.

### Why do I stare into space so much?

It’s natural for us to daydream or zone out from time to time, especially when we’re dealing with the stressors of everyday life.

But if you’ve noticed that you’re zoning out frequently or experiencing other symptoms of dissociation, it can be helpful to reach out to a therapist. Together, you can find out the reason for your dissociation and explore treatment options that can help.

If you’re new to therapy, here are some of our top tips for [finding a good therapist](#), as well as some resources to get you started on your search:

- American Psychological Association (APA): [Psychologist Locator](#)
- Anxiety & Depression Association of America (ADAA): [Therapist Directory](#)
- FindTreatment.gov: [Search For Treatment](#)
- Mental Health America (MHA): [Treatment Resources Page](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): [Locator Tool](#)

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## Takeaway

Dissociation is a common response to stress or trauma that can make someone feel or act detached from themselves or the world around them. When a person is experiencing an episode of dissociation, they may have an unfocused, blank expression – sometimes known as the thousand-yard stare.

If you or someone you love has been experiencing frequent symptoms of dissociation, there may be an underlying reason. Consider reaching out to a doctor or therapist to discuss your symptoms and the treatment options available to you.

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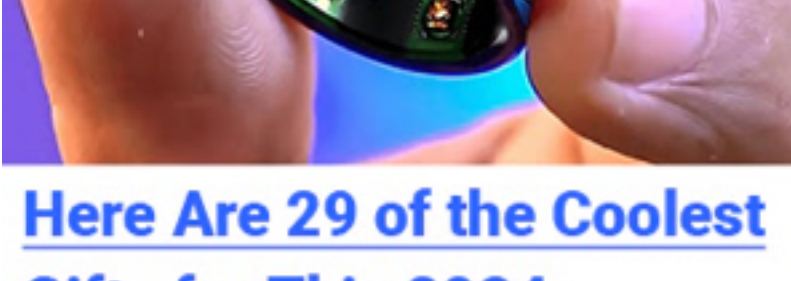
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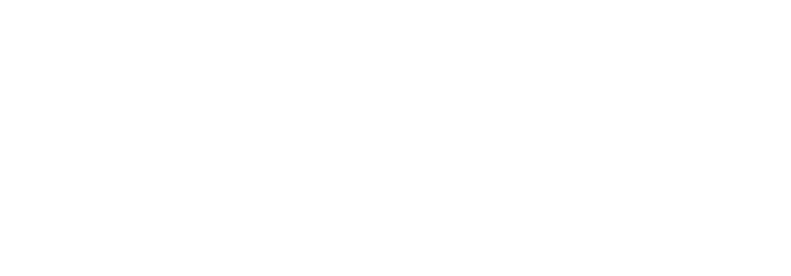
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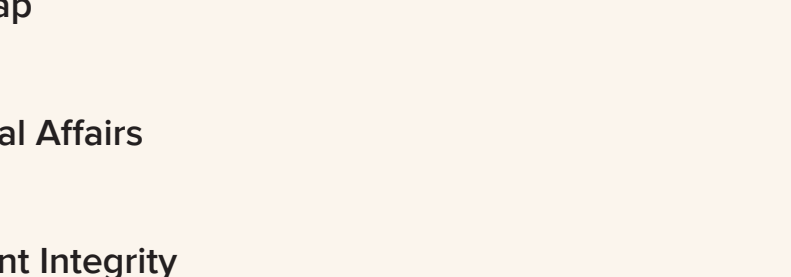
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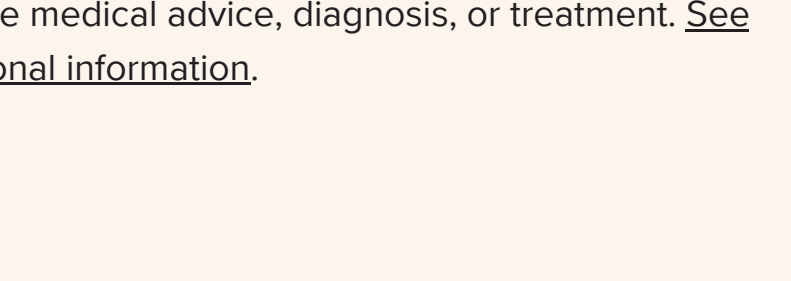
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