

Amnesia



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Introduction

Amnesia or memory loss is a condition where a person experiences a loss of memory information without a loss of self-awareness (not remembering who he/she is).

Despite the fact that individuals with amnesia do remember who they are, they usually have trouble learning new things or making new memories.

Amnesia may be brought on by a head injury, a stroke, substance abuse, or a serious emotional event, such as a motor vehicle accident. Depending on the reason, amnesia may be either temporary or permanent.

Dissociative amnesia is not the same as simple amnesia. With dissociative amnesia, the memories still exist but are deeply buried within the person's mind and cannot be recalled. However, the memories might resurface on their own or after being triggered by something in the person's surroundings.

Overview and Facts

According to the studies done on amnesia, it was found that amnesia does not affect a person's intelligence, general knowledge, awareness, personality or identity. It is also known that in cases of severe amnesia, it may be impossible to recover lost memories.

Dissociative amnesia was also found to be more common in women than in men. The frequency of dissociative amnesia tends to increase during stressful or traumatic periods, such as during wartime or after a natural disaster.

Symptoms

The two main symptoms of amnesia are:

- Anterograde amnesia which is an reduced ability to learn new information following the onset of amnesia
- Retrograde amnesia which is a reduced ability to recall past events and previously familiar information

Other symptoms include:

- False memories either completely invented or made up of genuine memories misplaced in time
- Neurological problems such as uncoordinated movements, tremors or seizures
- Confusion and/or disorientation

Causes and Risk Factors

Amnesia can result from damage to brain structures which control emotions and memories. These structures include the thalamus, which lies deep within the center of the brain, and the hippocampal formations, which are situated within the temporal lobes of your brain.

Other conditions that might cause amnesia are:

- Stroke
- Brain inflammation (encephalitis)
- Lack of adequate oxygen in the brain (for example, from heart attack, respiratory distress or carbon monoxide poisoning)
- Long-term alcohol abuse
- Tumors in areas of the brain that control memory
- Degenerative brain diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia

The chance of developing Amnesia could increase in case of:

- Brain surgery, head injury or trauma
- Stroke
- Alcohol abuse
- Seizures

Test and Diagnosis

To diagnose amnesia, a person should consult a mental health professional who will rely on scientific criteria to check whether he/she has that disorder. Diagnosing amnesia includes a physical assessment and cognitive examination provided by the doctor or mental health professional.

The patient will also be undergoing a physical evaluation to check any other possible conditions as well.

Treatment

No medications are currently available for treating most types of amnesia. Although treatment, which also needs to include alcohol abstinence, can help prevent further damage, most people won't recover all of their lost memory.

When treating amnesia, mental health professionals use several techniques such as occupational therapy which involves learning new information to replace what was lost, or to use memories as a basis for taking in new information. People also undergo memory training for organizing information so that it is easier to remember old memories.

Some people also use electronic organizers for day to day activities such as the ones integrated in smart phones or handheld devices. Other memory aids include notebooks, wall calendars, and photographs of people and places.

Sources and Links

www.idraac.org
www.webmd.com
www.mayoclinic.com