

What causes DPAFU?

Our extensive contact with people who have experienced DPAFU through our clinic and research unit has led to our understanding of DPAFU as a response that is triggered in situations that are perceived by the person as overwhelming, threatening and inescapable. This may happen in response to a sudden event (for example, a bad drug experience or a panic attack) or it may build up over time as events accumulate. Because of the range of people who experience DPAFU, it appears that this is probably an innate response that can be triggered in anyone, given certain circumstances. In this chapter, we will look at our understanding of DPAFU from psychological and brain research.

There are a couple of metaphors that can be helpful to illustrate what seems to happen when DPAFU starts suddenly:

One way to think about it is like when an electrical system becomes overloaded — like one of those extension cables with multiple sockets — into which more and more electrical items are plugged in until, eventually, the fuse cuts out.

Another useful metaphor is that of an airbag in a car that is activated when the car is about to crash.

In both these examples, the fuse or airbag acts to protect the appliance or person in the car from greater harm. In a similar way, it seems that the purpose of DPAFU is to shut down our systems of reality, emotions, thought processes, perception and physical sensations to help us disconnect from what is overwhelming us. This gives rise to the sense of unreality and distance from ourselves and the world that is the fundamental characteristic of DPAFU, as well as buffering us from emotions or physical sensations.

Taken from: *Overcoming Depersonalisation and Feelings of Unreality: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* (Hunter et al.) (2nd Ed.)