

Movie: Get Out (2017)

Synopsis

Get Out (2017) is a mystery/thriller that follows Chris Washington, a young African American man who travels to rural upstate New York with his Caucasian girlfriend, Rose Armitage, to meet her eccentric but highly accomplished family. Shortly after his arrival at the Armitage home, Chris is hypnotized by Missy, Rose's mother, and briefly enters a dissociated state from which he recovers. Chris senses a strange atmosphere at the home where he meets Rose's father Dean (a neurologist), brother Jeremy (a medical student), Georgina (an African American housekeeper), and Walter (an African American groundskeeper). The film takes a disturbing turn [Spoiler Alert] when Chris attempts to leave the mansion and is instead held captive in the basement where he learns that the Armitage family transplants African American brains into Caucasian host's bodies. The film follows Chris as he tries to escape this twisted form of surgery.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

"The Sunken Place" in *Get Out* is an altered state of consciousness and therefore can be used to understand and review the dissociative disorders.

In psychiatry, dissociation is defined as the mental process of disconnecting from one's thoughts, feelings, memories, environment, or identity. In *Get Out*, The Sunken Place is used to describe a muted form of consciousness where the individual's consciousness is still present but is temporarily inaccessible. This state of consciousness is similar to a dissociated state.

The DSM-5 lists three dissociative disorders:

1. Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder: persistent or recurrent experiences of depersonalization derealization (or both).
 - Depersonalization: experiences of unreality, detachment, or the subjective sense of being an outside observer with respect to one's thoughts, feelings, or body.
 - Derealization: experiences of unreality or detachment with respect to one's surroundings.
2. Dissociative Amnesia: an inability to recall important autobiographical information, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature, that is inconsistent with ordinary forgetting. Dissociative Amnesia may occur with or without fugue; the purposeful travel away from one's home with the assumption of a new identity.
3. Dissociative Identity Disorder: disruption of identity caused by two or more distinct personality states which may described in some cultures as an experience of possession. The disruption in identity involves a marked discontinuity in sense of self or agency accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory/motor functioning. These signs and symptoms may be observed by others or reported by the individual.

While the hypnosis appears to induce derealization, the effects of the brain transplant produce an altered sense of identity representing Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). The final teaching point then is the hierarchy of DSM-5 diagnoses. Specifically, when depersonalization and/or derealization appear in the context of amnesia, then Dissociative Amnesia is the most likely diagnosis. Similarly, when amnesia, depersonalization and/or derealization appear in the context of a distinct alter personality state that takes over one's conscious awareness, then DID is the most likely diagnosis.

Prerana Chatty, Anthony Tobia, MD. Copyright © 2020 Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. tobiaat@rwjms.rutgers.edu All rights reserved.