
UNDERSTANDING DISSOCIATION

D.I.D. stands for Dissociative Identity Disorder, and is sometimes called Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD).

The idea of dissociation can cause a sense of alarm or fear. It doesn't seem 'normal'. However for some people this is their normal, and no-one need be alarmed or scared, as the ability to dissociate is an incredible and creative way for a person to survive extreme trauma. If you think, or know, that you are dissociative then you can also know that you have an inner strength and a strong will to survive!

Your ability to 'disconnect' from the present, and to have different 'personalities' inside you is a mechanism you developed for coping with very painful experiences in your childhood. Many people have been misdiagnosed with such conditions as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, when they actually have a dissociative disorder.

There are several types of Dissociation - everyone experiences some form of dissociation for instance, during a drive along a familiar route, finding that you have arrived at your destination with no memory of the journey itself, being able to block out noises and interruptions to focus on a particular task. These are all forms of dissociation at a minor level.

Other forms of dissociation are people experiencing feelings of detachment from their physical body, maybe feeling that their body is somehow unreal. Some people cannot remember significant personal details, or have no recollection of certain periods of time, or cannot remember people they have supposedly met. The various types of dissociative disorder can be identified according to the type of symptoms you experience.

What you (as a survivor with D.I.D.) may experience:

- ◆ Gaps in memory
- ◆ Out-of-body experiences
- ◆ Loss of feeling in parts of your body
- ◆ Distorted views of your body
- ◆ Forgetting appointments and/or personal information
- ◆ Feelings of being unreal
- ◆ Internal voices and dialogue
- ◆ A sense of detachment from your emotions
- ◆ Feeling as though there are different people inside you
- ◆ Others telling you that you have behaved out of character
- ◆ A sense that objects change shape colour and size
- ◆ Writing in different handwriting
- ◆ Feeling that you don't know who you are
- ◆ Feeling detached from the world
- ◆ Referring to yourself as 'we'
- ◆ Finding possessions that you cannot recall buying or being given
- ◆ Feeling uncertain of the boundaries between yourself and others
- ◆ Feeling like a stranger to yourself
- ◆ Acting like different people / child-like behaviour

A person with dissociative identity disorder has developed (almost invariably in childhood), the ability to create alternative personalities within their one body. These other personalities can be called alters. The personality born at the same time as the physical body is often referred to as the host, or the body.

The creation of other personalities is a coping strategy, and each personality is created to deal with a traumatic childhood event. Each separate identity is then in control of the thoughts and behaviour of the body throughout their lives. If there is more than one personality, they each have a way of thinking and being in the world that is distinct from one another. The different identities may or may not be aware of how the others are behaving.

Living with D.I.D. can be challenging. You may be able to hold down a responsible job and/or bring up a family, but coping with dissociation can be an exhausting process, particularly as you may be worried about the response of other people, and may feel the need to hide the fact that you have D.I.D.

It is possible that you will be feeling confused, frightened and misunderstood by others. The alters may be feeling frustrated that they do not have a voice during certain times of the day and clamour for attention at difficult times.

However, many people do live with D.I.D. for many years without problems. Those who do experience problems may need professional assistance to work through issues arising from being dissociative and find strategies to accommodate all the alters.

Professional support always involves 'talking treatments', where both the underlying causes and the effects of dissociating can be explored. Many people find just being able to speak about their inner world in a safe and non-judgmental environment with someone who understands the issues is immensely comforting.

Feeling relaxed enough to explore your personalities can help to bring about increased connection between thoughts, feelings and memories. Through this a sense of empowerment can start to develop as you are put in touch with the choices that are available to you. Gradually a greater sense of wholeness and internal order begins to develop; life begins to feel a little more hopeful!

Self-Help Techniques:

- ◆ Keeping a journal - can help your personalities to get to know of each others existence, and can help them to connect and co-operate with each other.
- ◆ Imaging - a way of imaginatively creating an internal place where you can feel safe and protected.
- ◆ Grounding techniques - useful for keeping you connected to the present, avoiding flashbacks and intrusive thoughts. These include breathing slowly, sniffing a strong smell, walking barefoot or holding an identifiable object.
- ◆ Reading about the lives and coping strategies of other survivors.
- ◆ Support groups - sharing experiences with others in a boundaried and well-facilitated group can be helpful in both emotional and practical ways.

There are now more organisations able to understand what you may be going through, and they could be able to help to reduce the confusion you may be feeling. If you feel that you would like additional help then you can call our Helpline on: 0808 802 9999.

You could also contact the following organisation:

First Person Plural

PO Box 2537
Wolverhampton WV4 4ZL

E-mail: fpp@firstpersonplural.org.uk

Website: www.firstpersonplural.org.uk

This is an organisation set up and run by survivors for dissociative survivors. They produce a newsletter, a reading list and an optional contact list for members who have D.I.D.

A useful book on the subject, written by a survivor with D.I.D. is:

Living with Your Selves: A survival manual for people with multiple personalities

Sandra J Hocking and Company
ISBN: 1877872083

"Living with Your Selves is the first self-help manual for Multiple Personality Disorders. The fact that it is written by someone with MPD is evident throughout, at the same time, the manual is balanced and sensitive, and reviews the diagnosis and treatment of MPD accurately and in detail." Colin A Ross, MD. Director, Dissociative Disorders Unit, Charter Hospital, Dallas