



# FIRST PERSON PLURAL

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national survivor-led association for dissociative survivors of abuse and trauma & their allies

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## Brief Information Sheet 1

(July 2007)

### Dissociation & Complex Dissociative Distress

***Dissociation*** is an instinctive, natural and universal ability of the human mind to separate off and keep apart the different aspects (e.g. feelings, thoughts, sensations, perceptions, behaviours and memories) of an internal or external experience which are usually linked to each other. The mind does this automatically and rapidly when what is happening is felt to be too distressing, painful, traumatising, over-stimulating or otherwise overwhelming.

Thus, dissociation is one way in which we are equipped to cope with threat and survive potentially life endangering events. Using dissociation at such times, the mind helps us to do what needs to be done by giving us just enough information, a piece at a time, so we can live through the event and, if possible, get ourselves to safety.

Everyone dissociates to some degree and even in ordinary situations the mind may use dissociation to keep from our immediate awareness information that is not essential to the task in hand e.g. the "highway hypnosis" that can happen when driving a familiar route which makes it common to arrive at your destination with no specific memories of the journey.

Some people even train themselves to use dissociation to relax or for spiritual or cultural reasons e.g. meditation or shamanism.

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**Dissociative distress** or disorders can result if the mind has to use dissociation too often, particularly during early childhood (e.g. if the child experiences repeated abuse over an extended period). When dissociation is used repeatedly to survive such traumas the child's brain and thus emotional and personality development can be affected. Dissociation is such an effective survival mechanism that using it too often, blocks the development of alternative coping strategies.

Unfortunately, an individual's sense of identity, reality and continuity depends on their feelings, thoughts, sensations, perceptions, behaviours and memories etc being mostly connected.

Using dissociation too often consequently confuses and/or changes your sense of who you are (**Identity Confusion or Identity Alteration**), and/or leaves too many blanks in your memories (**Dissociative Amnesia**) and/or changes your sense of your body (**Depersonalisation**) and/or your environment (**Derealisation**).

To a greater or lesser extent such dissociative effects occur in many types of emotional or mental distress, illnesses or disorders particularly when linked to neglect, abuse or trauma in childhood. But only when dissociative effects are the primary feature is the distress, illness or disorder categorised as dissociative.

First Person Plural is focused on those abuse/trauma survivors who experience the most complex types of dissociative distress or disorders. That is, which feature identity confusion or alteration with or without dissociative amnesia and usually with depersonalisation and/or derealisation.

In psychiatric terms, such complex dissociative distress is known as **Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)**, or alternatively, **Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD)** or, when identity disturbances are less severe or frequent and/or not accompanied by moderate to severe amnesia, the term used is **Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (DDNOS)**.