

What I told my family about DID

Dissociation Identity Disorder (formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder) is a very complex, multi-layered condition and one which is not easily or quickly diagnosed. A person with this condition will often have acquired an amazing coping mechanism which can leave them adept at totally hiding the real person (or people) inside, even from those closest to them. Equally, some find that their traumatic life experiences leave them very unable to cope, and for them life can disintegrate into total and un-manageable chaos. For all DID people, turmoil, confusion, fear, chaos, exhaustion and crisis are part of everyday survival long after the trauma ceases.

In a nutshell, dissociation occurs when a child suffers trauma, often sexual abuse, that its infant brain cannot comprehend, process or cope with. The child dissociates from her/his own body to survive; the more frequent or severe the trauma, the worse the condition may be. This can explain why that child in adulthood may well have very fragmented, brief or apparently non-existent memories of what happened to them. The brain has done an excellent job of protecting its child from things that would have totally broken her/him at such a young age.

In the long term, it means that certain experiences, ages and personalities are arrested and fragmented, becoming locked within that person. This can all remain locked and hidden until something disrupts the person's often convincingly capable coping exterior and after which a breakdown can occur. The child who suffered horrific traumas dissociates and 'disappears inside', and stays there apparently 'dormant' for many years, but may start to surface again during adulthood causing very confusing and inexplicable reactions within the 'adult' survivor.

DID actually is an amazing process. Without it, many would never have survived the subsequent years following abuse. The body cleverly finds a way to 'cope'. Survivors may find themselves with many different personalities within themselves, varying in age, sex, ethnicity and character. Some may be very capable, organised and controlling while others may be quite the opposite. Capable parts have held life together for the whole person - but those same parts can be very reluctant to give up their control and may resent the intrusion of help such as a therapist. The first lesson those young children learned was to trust no-one - the road to recovery and a future is therefore a long and painful one, but one which can reap rewards, the main one of which is being free to live life fully together once again.