

Working with the Protectors by Sara Lambert

You do not have to be multiple to have protector parts of your self. I hope singleton dissociators also find value in this article.

Your protector selves are very dedicated to their jobs, which they have been doing for most, if not all, of their lives. Indeed, they may fear that, if they do not keep doing these jobs, you and/or your inner system will be in danger. For this reason it can be difficult to disarm the protectors and convince them to either give up their jobs or adapt them to better suit the new, peaceful times. Their reluctance will not be simply a matter of stubborn pride. They will be genuinely frightened of the consequences of stopping work.

I do not advocate anyone giving up his or her job or being made redundant. People/parts are too valuable and essential a part of the self as a whole to just be set aside like that. Rather, I have personally experienced huge improvements for everyone - the individual self and the system as a whole - if selves are willing to be flexible, adaptive and find new and nurturing ways to use their skills. After all, these skills are much too valuable to allow to be wasted. Even the meanest monsters inside possess characteristics which can go towards making a more complete and richly endowed self or self-system. (Not everything about us has to be positive, after all! The purpose of this work is not to end up like PollyAnna!)

It's all about respecting each other. The protectors need to learn to respect that the others inside don't deserve to be manipulated or terrorised. They also need to respect the others' strengths and abilities, and not see them as wimps who could not survive without their protection. At the same time, the rest of the system needs to respect that the protectors have good motives for the things they do.

So, how do you respectfully and successfully convince your protectors that they need to exchange their weapons for blankets?

You could try to outwit them with clever tricks and devices. Unfortunately, this is almost guaranteed to fail. Protectors are very intellectually sharp and have kept you alive for so long thanks to their ability to think fast and use their talent as escape artists. This is why no suicide and no self-harm contracts can be tricky. Protectors will invariably find any loop-hole or turns of phrase in the contract and use these to negate the terms in a way that is technically not dishonest.. They generally have little respect for contracts because they do not believe in the power of mere words to keep anyone safe. They think actions are the only things that really work. For this reason, contracts are fairly useless unless they contain rewards for upholding the terms of the contract for a certain period of time, and/or consequences for breaking them.

The other problem involved with trying to outwit your protectors is that they have vast resources to back them up. If they suspect you or your therapist are trying to "trick" them, they can shut down all internal operations, sabotage your life so basically you come to a standstill, or drag out every dissociative technique they can to keep you confused, scared, and on the defensive. They will see you as the enemy and will fight back - for your own good, of course.

Instead of getting around them like this, you could instead approach them on an intellectual level and get them to use their brains to see the logic of your side of the story.

For example, when I was trying to get one of my protectors to stop cutting the body, I pointed out how difficult life was for him. We were always trying to take his power away from him and stop him from doing what he did best (keeping us safe from fear and shame by cutting us) and we had isolated him from the rest of the system because we were scared and angry with him. All in all, the circumstances made it very hard for him to do his job effectively. He responded to this rational argument much better than he ever did to our emotional pleas for him to stop cutting. We then got together and negotiated a compromise solution in which his needs (to protect us and express the system's bitterness) and our needs (to not be cut) were respected. Now, we support him to do his redefined job and give him praise, encouragement, love and company. His life is much better and so is ours. It's a win-win situation.

Like everyone, protectors only want to be understood and appreciated for the hard work they do. Try giving them positive and constructive feedback, rather than just complaining. Ask them for any suggestions they have for interesting and effective ways to protect you. There's a good chance they have studied information about healing and dissociation because they are very aware that knowledge is power. (It's common for protector selves to study up on MPD so they can point out all the symptoms you don't have, and thus 'prove' you aren't multiple.) They can draw on this factual knowledge to help you all.

Another thing you could try is going ahead with your healing without the protectors' support. You can ignore their complaints and protect yourself against their protection, for example by having another self 'sit on' the protector so they can't act. However, in the long this will damage your system as a whole. Protectors will never abdicate their jobs until they know 100% that the system, especially the children, will be safe. If you imprison them inside and disempower them they will either fight to maintain their power or will sink into despair. It's not only an abusive way to treat one of your selves, it's only a waste of energy and talents which can be utilised to your vast benefit.

Try to keep in mind always that protectors, no matter how critical or stroppy or downright nasty, are as much survivors of abuse as are you. They have vast reservoirs of fear, sadness and loneliness. They yearn to belong and have someone protect them. In many cases protectors are only children.

Instead of shunning protectors, teach them the qualities you want them to have. Talk to them about feelings and let them observe or share the feelings of other selves - although only slowly, so they don't become overwhelmed. Give them their own private journal in which they can write about their fears (and which no-one else in the system will read without permission). Give them a paint brush or crayons and some paper, and encourage them to express themselves - reassuring them they can't get it 'wrong' and that you won't laugh at their efforts. Teach them how to hope and trust that you will survive by showing them the skills and capabilities of other people in your system.

Protectors are terrified of emotions. Despite their cold and fierce facade they are very vulnerable people, always trying to hide their deep, dark feelings from themselves and other people out of sheer fear. They don't believe feelings can be changed. Furthermore, they may equate feeling with action (for example, anger equals violence; desire equals indulgence) after having been raised with abusive parents who constantly acted out their feelings. As most protectors are control freaks (even if their methods include creating chaos in you) the idea that, if you have a feeling, you will not be able to control it, is appalling to them. You need to show them that it's possible to just sit with a feeling, experiencing it in small pieces and allowing it to evolve.

Protectors have a lot of influence in the system, built up over years of domination (and in many cases outright tyranny). You can harness this authority and turn it into something good. Protectors make wonderful teachers for the children. They can tell them about the dangers of the world, advise them of ways to stay safe, and help them develop their own natural strengths. They can supervise or stand guard when the kids are 'out' in the park or during therapy sessions. Protectors are also great to take along on rescue missions to 'remove' children from the past and bring them forward into the safe present time. And they're excellent with rebellious, confused teens, because they can deal with them in a straight forward, non-emotional manner to which teens respond best.

Protectors are wonderful creators. They have a talent for seeing patterns, balance, harmony, and fine detail, as well as the energy to see a project through to the finish. It might be hard to imagine your workaholic office-self or your bitchy wrist-cutter or your prim perfectionist writing a fairy story or taking artistic photos, but if you give them a chance you're likely to be pleasantly surprised by the results.

Protectors are often calm, confident and highly capable in dealing with the outside world, and can use this in their dealings with the inside world too. They make superb mediators between selves, can pass messages or translations on to the therapist, and keep order at your next system meeting.

Your protectors deserve your love and respect. I'm sure this isn't easy, though, as they have probably put you through years of hell. But remember, they have kept you alive, preserving the system at all cost to themselves (and much cost to you), even though it might have seemed at times they were trying to kill you. If you are able to come to good terms with each other, your protectors will give you the strength, courage, inspiration and sense of wonder that will help you to move forward and succeed with your life.

Reference : Goulding, R & Schwartz, R - The Mosaic Mind, Norton & Co, USA, 1995
