

# Understanding Multiplicity

The experience of having more than one person, self or identify within the body

**This document contains sensitive information, please talk to someone you trust if you find the information upsetting in any way.**

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## What is multiplicity?

Lots of young people, all over the world, talk about the experience of having **more than one person, self or identify** within their body. This experience can be known as multiplicity, although there are lots of different words used to describe it.

We all show different parts of ourselves to different people, and in different situations. Like we might behave differently with our mum or dad than with a friend. And we can also feel conflict within ourselves – e.g. sometimes a part of us wants to go out, but another wants to stay at home. But for some young people, the experience of having different parts or selves is a lot stronger than this, and it may be an experience that's difficult to make sense of, or cope with.

You might be experiencing yourself as being one single self, but with a wiser part and an inner child. Or you might have different parts or selves who have their own name, gender, voice, age and story. They may each carry their own memories, and have different personalities. They may all make decisions together, or some parts may be the leaders and make decisions for everyone. Some young people hear voices they identify as parts or selves within them. Others experience parts or selves as being outside of their body, as people or friends they can talk to.

## Is multiplicity a mental health issue?

The word multiplicity describes an experience - it isn't a diagnosis. Some young people who experience multiplicity have worries about their mental health, but others don't. There are as many different ways to experience multiplicity as there are young people who identify as multiple or plural (or who use another word to describe the experience\*). E.g. one young person might find the experience comforting at times, but frightening or worrying at others. Another might find the experience really distressing and overwhelming for much or all of the time, and life may be feeling hard to bear.

Some people who experience multiplicity find it useful to receive diagnoses like Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) or Other Specified Dissociative Disorder (OSDD), especially if they're distressed or find their experiences difficult to manage. It's your choice whether you'd like to pursue a diagnosis or not – and you might find it helpful to discuss this with someone you trust – like a parent or another supporter.

*\* We're going to say 'parts' and 'multiplicity' to describe these experiences, only because it's shorter than using all the different words. People use many words to describe their experiences- parts, persons, selves, alters, headmates, soulbonds, thoughtforms- or systems, plurals, multiples- and many, many more. No one experiences multiplicity in exactly the same way you do. We are all different, and trying to find the words to describe who we are can take time.*

## Why do people experience multiplicity?

It depends. For some young people, it's just who they are, and how they are in the world. For others, it's something that's linked to how they experience and understand their gender(s). For others, it's how they connect to ancestors or the spiritual world. And for others, it's related to difficult earlier experiences. Sometimes, when we are hurt or experience trauma, in order to cope, we dissociate: we switch out of the experience to escape it. It can be a really useful and sometimes life-saving survival strategy. Sometimes, when this happens, the part of us that couldn't disconnect carries the memory of what happened, and doesn't grow older. This can become a part.

## Multiplicity can be challenging

Multiplicity isn't in itself a problem. A lot of people find it normal, or necessary, or amazing, or something in between. But when multiple parts with different ages, interests, personalities and genders share the same body, things can get challenging at times.

For example, you may not want some parts to come out in front of people you don't know, or during something important like an exam. They might want to play or say or do silly things, when you have other things to do- and get cross when you don't let them.

You can also lose time (sometimes known as 'amnesia' or 'fugue states') where a different part goes inside for a few hours or days, and you don't know what has happened while you were away. This can also be frustrating and exhausting- and sometimes really worrying, as you don't know if you've been safe.

For some people, parts might carry really intense feelings. They might say nasty things, or behave in a way you don't like. They might be so young they can't speak- but you might be able to feel their sadness, which might be really upsetting for you. For some young people, some parts might hurt the body through self-harm. This can feel really overwhelming and confusing.

For some young people it can also be really exhausting to feel there are so many competing needs and people inside of them, but who are not always clear about what they want. You might find you become really good at negotiating, to make sure everyone is happy!

It can be harder if it feels like there are walls between you and the different parts. Sometimes you may be able to sense or hear them clearly, but other times they may feel really far away, or be inaccessible. This might make you feel like you can't control your own self or life, which could make you feel very stuck or overwhelmed.

## Switching

Some young people find that they 'switch' between parts. One part 'comes out' or 'fronts', which usually means they are in control of the body and interact with the outside world. Other parts that were out, or fronting, go back inside or away. For some people, they will be aware of this when it is happening, and it might feel like a part of them moves slightly into the background, while another part moves forward. This can be confusing and upsetting because it can make you feel unsure about who you are, and maybe that you are 'acting' or 'lying' about multiplicity.

Other people might experience it as a blackout, and have no sense of switching- but might come back to find themselves in a different place, which can feel really strange and distressing.

Other people find that they 'blend'- so it's not always clear to them, or to others that there are a few parts blended together. This can be confusing as you can feel unclear about your identity. On the other hand it can be a helpful way of letting other parts be heard, but having more control over it.

If you're distressed by how or how often you switch or disconnect, it may be helpful to start to think about the warning signs of when you start to switch out. For some people, it can feel like a wave inside, or you might start feeling really fuzzy, headachy or sleepy, or some parts might become louder. You can also have a think about what some of the triggers might be. It might be that this happens more when you're stressed, or when you're in certain situations or with certain people. Knowing the triggers and warning signs can be a way of learning more about your parts and what roles they play, and may help you understand why switches are happening. Some people also learn how to control switches.

## Coping strategies

If you're finding yourself really overwhelmed or distressed, or you're having flashbacks, try our grounding strategies: [www.voicecollective.co.uk/coping/calming-safety-strategies](http://www.voicecollective.co.uk/coping/calming-safety-strategies)

If you find that you're losing time, and you don't know what you've been doing or where you've been, that can mean that for some reason your mind thinks this is safest for you. Exploring what that means to you can be helpful. There are a few practical things you can do too:

- You can change the settings on your phone so you can track where you've been (on iPhones, go to Settings/Privacy/Location Services/System Services/Frequent Locations)
- You can check your messages and apps to see who

you've been talking to

- You can check your travel card or bank statement online which might show you where you've been and what you've done
- You can also ask a trusted friend or worker, or your parts to help you with any of these.

If these don't work at first or you can't remember what you've learned, please don't be discouraged. Sometimes parts function best if they stay hidden and they might not want to know things if they don't feel confident it's a good idea. You can work together to decide that.

In the longer term, it's great to work towards trying to hear what the different parts are saying to you. Sometimes this means finding the hidden meaning in the messages. For example, a part who is saying scary things to you might be telling you that you're not feeling safe right now. Or a younger part who is asking for attention might be telling you that you need to look after yourself and slow down. Although it can feel like some of your parts are behaving in really unhelpful ways, it may be there is a purpose to what they are doing.

Some people find that getting their different parts to communicate more with one another can be helpful. If they're not able to talk to each other directly, it may be they can write or email each other, maybe to tell them more about themselves and their story. Some people find that having social media accounts for different parts can make them feel heard and validated.

For some people, it feels important to break down the walls between the parts, and live as a system. For others, it feels useful and safer to keep some of the walls in place. Some people want to become 'whole' and 'one' again. Others find they value the richness of their many parts. Some people want to and are able to map out their system, but other people find that there is so much change in the system that mapping wouldn't feel possible or helpful.

There is no right thing to want, or right way to go about it. But it can be helpful to think about what you and your parts want and how you'd each like to live and communicate (or not) with each other.

For more information, please visit <http://bit.ly/2R8JvkC>

## How do I tell family and friends about it?

It can feel really difficult to tell other people about these experiences. A lot of people may not have heard of multiplicity, or might think it sounds scary because they don't understand it. It can be even harder if you don't always have the words to describe your experiences.

But many people who experience multiplicity do find they are able to tell people who are close to them about it. Luckily there are lots of forums and spaces online where you can talk to other people who experience multiplicity; for example,

**<http://forum.voicecollective.co.uk>**

If you're unsure about this, take it slowly. Information like this leaflet can help other people to understand. You might want to start with someone you feel very close to and safe with, or you might want to start with someone who is paid to keep private things you share, such as a counsellor.

## How do I get support and more information?

For more information, ideas and support, you might like to visit:

The Dissociative Initiative – **<https://di.org.au>**

The Dissociative Initiative Online Discussion Group - **<https://www.facebook.com/groups/thedissociativeinitiative/>**

Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors – **[www.pods-online.org.uk](http://www.pods-online.org.uk)**

First Person Plural **[www.firstpersonplural.org.uk](http://www.firstpersonplural.org.uk)**

National Association of People Abused in Childhood – **<https://napac.org.uk>**

Healthy Multiplicity – **<http://healthymultiplicity.com>**

If you're feeling confused, overwhelmed, worried or afraid, you can always talk to us. Visit our website: **[www.voicecollective.co.uk](http://www.voicecollective.co.uk)**, or email us at: **[info@voicecollective.co.uk](mailto:info@voicecollective.co.uk)**.

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