

Man up, man down: male perspectives on life with DID

Jon

On a certain level I've known about my dissociation all my life. But it was only really for the year or so leading up to my breakdown 5 years ago that I began to accept that something wasn't right and I started to become aware of having various 'parts' of my personality. It was horrendous – all these horrific memories were flooding back into my consciousness through the different 'parts'. It was terrifying and I had no idea what was going on. I was living on my own in a flat and I was desperate. I was awake all night and asleep during the day and everything was back to front. It was an incredibly difficult time and I just had to grab onto whatever I could to get me through it. If there had been something out there at the time, an organisation like PODS, then I think I would have found that really reassuring. But there didn't seem to be anything, and especially nothing for men.

I tried to get funding for treatment from the NHS via the Clinic for Dissociative Studies but of course that's very hard to come by. But I found somebody to work with, and they were able to confirm my suspicions about DID. Previously I had had a pretty awful experience with the NHS. At a very critical point in my self-awareness, when I was really struggling and going through a very difficult time, I was frequently met with misunderstanding. I had gone to see a guy who was doing an assessment on me in order to see if I could have therapy on the NHS, and I was trying to explain about my different parts and he just wasn't

getting it at all. He just said, "There's no way you could possibly know that, and it's just your opinion." It was so patronising. He even said, "We need to help you become an adult," and I remember at the time being utterly outraged that this person had spoken to me like that. Had it not been for the support of the Samaritans, who had been amazing and were much more educated about this kind of stuff, then the experiences that I had with the NHS would really have sent me over the edge. That kind of lack of understanding is really dangerous and can make things so much worse.

I've talked to one or two people about having DID. Sometimes I feel like I'm leading a double life and it feels that I should tell everyone. I've told a few people and explained the context of the things that I went through, to help them understand why I am the way I am, and that has helped a lot. If you try to explain it without the background, then it doesn't make sense to them. But if you say, "I was ritually abused, tortured and subjected to mind control and the only way I could survive it was this clever mechanism called dissociation which allowed me to get through it" then they see the logic of it and it's easier for them to grasp it.

We live in a society that on the whole doesn't allow men to be emotional and show their vulnerability – ridiculous stereotypes that don't make it easy for us to get help. Last week I went away with my girlfriend for a few days and I was having a tricky time and struggling a bit. I could tell that my really angry part was around a lot and I was trying to

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look after him and placate him. We were at the end of our stay and we were leaving, and the receptionist, a woman, said to me in front of my girlfriend, "You should man up a bit." It was sickening, and I was livid. I was already teetering on the edge, and I was doing the best I could. People don't know what you've gone through and how hard you're trying. Even when you've done a lot of work in therapy, something can happen like this that triggers a whole load of very raw emotions. And I've found that these comments, like "pull yourself together" and "you need to man up a bit" tend to come from women normally. It's interesting that they don't tend to come from other men.

On another occasion I had to go for an MRI scan and I was really stressed because I don't cope well with confined spaces. I was panicking but trying to calm myself down by talking to the technician, who was being very helpful and reassuring. And at that moment a lady in the waiting room who was sat opposite me piped up out of nowhere and said, "Men

shouldn't be afraid of things like this – you're being a bit pathetic!" That's difficult to handle.

Dealing with the helplessness inherent in abuse has been one of the hardest things for me as a man. There are stereotypes of what men and women are 'supposed' to be like. And I don't know if it's something to do with male pride or the way the male ego operates, but I think there is something incredibly emasculating in the kind of stuff that I went through. It's odd walking around as a man who is nearly six feet tall and yet feeling like I'm a little boy. It's so odd because there is a such a paradox: if you are male, you are expected to protect yourself and protect others, but what do you do when you're walking around with a massive sense of vulnerability from the kind of trauma that you've experienced? It's very, very difficult.

It's as if women are given permission to struggle more. And sometimes it seems as if women are more inclined to talk about stuff, and meet up with friends and chat. But I think that guys generally do that less, and get isolated. It makes me so sad to think that there must be so many guys out there who are struggling like I am. They're being completely missed and misdiagnosed by the NHS and the prison service, and they are either suffering alone, in silence, or they are acting out in violence. I don't condone violence at all, but I've come pretty close to it myself, so I understand it.

Anger has been a huge part of my emotional response to what I've been going through. The irony is that I never thought I was an angry person, and it wasn't until I had the breakdown and all these memories started coming back that the rage really kicked off. It was almost as if it had been stored up for years and years and then it exploded. Many a time I would want to hit people and

kick them and kill them, and I would literally get myself off a bus or off the street to make sure I didn't do anything. I'd keep reminding myself, over and over again: "It's not okay to hurt other people. Just get indoors, and if you need to scream and shout then you can do it then." And that's what I used to do. I used to punch and kick and let it out, to let this ball of rage come up and explode out of me.

I think that's one of the reasons why lots of men don't seek therapy, because they feel like they are being censored and they're not going to be

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allowed to express their anger fully. It utterly terrified me when it first started happening. I really did feel that I was capable of killing someone, and that was a scary place to be, feeling out of control. But I think I've been fortunate in that I've had an outlet, a place to take that anger, in therapy. One of my complaints to my therapist has been about this whole issue. I made it very clear that I had never hurt anybody and that I never will, but I at least need to have a place to be able to express that rage in a safe way. It's a crucial part

of it for me because it's a very justified response to years and years of torture and abuse.

But women, from what I understand, tend to turn their anger inwards, so there is a lot more self-harm. And in many ways that is more socially acceptable than the way that we as men can end up expressing our rage, so that's hard. For me also, when I was a boy, I was treated very differently to the girls in terms of the actual abuse. In fact, the boys were very often kept separate to the girls. The kind of abuse that I suffered was based around me being male, and so I was conditioned and treated in a certain way. Ultimately they were aiming to turn me into a murderer-psychopath, because they wanted me to be like them. When I was 9 years old, I was at one of these ritual abuse 'parties' and I shouted at them all – I rebelled. And the consequences of that were horrific. They were scared that I was going to talk, and they had to silence me, so for the next three years every weakness I had was homed in on and tortured, to completely silence me forever. They used to terrify me with high speeds, hanging me off the sides of buildings ... extreme stuff. I don't think they used to do that to the girls.

At first, it was really frustrating for me that the DID world is so dominated by women. I was a real misogynist for many years. One of my heroes is John Lennon and I remember him saying, "I used to be a misogynist but it was such hard work." And it is, because it means that you're hating half the world all the time! I was always more angry towards women, especially when I realised how involved in my abuse they were, not just allowing it to happen but taking part too. That's when the rage really came through for me, because it was about the mother, and it was about the mother's mother, and a whole thing

stretching back I don't know how far. It felt to me that the abuse by the women was so much more humiliating and emasculating. In a way, the sense of injustice and the anger about being abused by a woman as a boy was the hardest thing for me to deal with. And that's been a real challenge. It's made things difficult in working with a female therapist – we've certainly had our moments! On the whole though I think it's been important that she's female. One of the most important aspects of recovery for me has been about getting in touch with the little boy inside who was so dreadfully treated. But in a sense it's also been about getting in touch with my own feminine side as well, and that has been a really key part of becoming more 'centralised'.

We do live in a very male-dominated world, and things are very much geared that way. There has to be room for men who have been abused to be given a voice and to be treated with respect. It's an enormous thing just to exist, to keep living. I think it would be great if there were more awareness in the media, so that people came forward for help earlier on. I count myself quite fortunate in that I was quite young when I had a breakdown, but I know that a lot of men will go on for many years with this stuff without seeking help, or getting help. As a society we have to be much more aware that the abuse of boys and men happens and for appropriate help to be available.

Aiden

I had no contact with mental health services at all until I went to the GP because I was tired all the time and constantly anxious. They did all the blood tests and it wasn't physical and so the conclusion was anxiety and depression. I've had an assessment with a psychologist and now I'm on

the waiting list for counselling, but with the help of PODS I've looked into finding a counsellor privately and I'm starting in September. I've evidently got DID but I don't have a piece of paper to say it. Looking back, I can see that when I was working as a mental health nurse there were many, many people with dissociative symptoms, but they were labelled with bipolar or schizophrenia or a personality disorder. I wouldn't want to go back and be treated on the ward I worked on.

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I've known for a year and four months that I am dissociative, but it's taken me all this time to come to terms with it and feel okay about it. Initially it was yes, no, yes, no: denial, then yes when I felt the symptoms, no when I didn't. A lot of the time I deny it because it doesn't feel very real, so it's really hard to accept. I've developed an informal, supportive network of others with DID and we talk to one another, and that's helped me come to terms with it because when I talk to other people with the same symptoms, there's no shame: they understand, they know, and you can be yourself and I think that's been

really helpful. It's also been great to be on the PODS online forum because otherwise the whole thing is so isolating and shameful.

I'm quite fortunate in that I live in a community with other people, and as some of them also have DID they are very accepting. But it has affected some other relationships. I told one friend about me and she was incredibly shocked, and it has taken her a while to calm down about it and accept what I'm saying. Another friend just goes quiet when I talk about it. Some friends just aren't able to be there with you, and that's why having friends with DID is a lifesaver really. In terms of my family, we're not meant to have problems, so it's just shameful and embarrassing. I've given them labels of depression and anxiety and not said anything else. My aunt, who brought me up, just wants me to go back and live with her and says that that will make everything alright, but of course it won't. She saw me at a wedding where I had been confident and outgoing, and she doesn't believe that that's not how I really am, that it was all just an act. I haven't seen my family in over a year now. I'm seriously concerned that if I did, I would never come back, that they would kidnap me. I feel like I'm living in one world and they are living in another and we are just not meeting.

In society it's not considered very 'manly' to be all emotional and tearful, and then to have to find support for it. A lot of the literature on DID is about women, and is written by women. I wanted to find something that is written from a male perspective but there's very little out there. But many of my symptoms and experiences seem to be the same as the women I know with DID. I've come to accept that all of my support and knowledge comes from women.

One of the big issues I feel for men with DID is just getting the support in the first place. It feels more acceptable for a woman to be 'needy'. At times I've just wanted to be held, but where can I get that from safely? And men tend to isolate more. I've been blessed by living in a community and although it's mostly all women here I can be weak and vulnerable with them and they can with me, and it's ok. I think it's more acceptable to get flustered and freeze, for your memory to go all over the place, if you're a woman. As a man you're expected to be strong, and not to be vulnerable, so that can be difficult.

Tom

After I left home, I became a catastrophic alcoholic and drug addict. But over the last 20 years I've sorted my life out and I've even become a vicar. I've had seven years of ordained ministry, which has gone swimmingly well. To all intents and purposes I am highly functioning, and in a way it was a bit of a shock to me and a few other people around me to find out that I have DID.

Given what I do for a living, and various other factors, I haven't wanted to submit myself to the mental health system. I've always been concerned about what an official diagnosis would mean, whether it would bar me from various activities, as one particular counsellor suggested that it might. So I don't feel that I need an official diagnosis. For the last 25 years, I've identified myself as a recovering alcoholic and people could say, "Have you ever been diagnosed as an alcoholic by a doctor?" I don't need to be; it's obvious. If people say to me, "How do you know you've got DID?" my answer is, "Well, there are other people in my head who occasionally shove me out of the way and take

control of my body and mouth! What more evidence do you need?!"

I've been very lucky in that I've been able to explain it to my wife and she came along to a PODS workshop with me, which was helpful. I've been able to talk to some other friends, who are sexual abuse survivors, and one who is a survivor of ritual abuse. I know a fair few people who are involved with DID and sexual abuse recovery, so that's helpful too. Other friends have found it harder to get their heads around it. I was put in touch with the therapist that I'm

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currently working with through PODS and she lives just around the corner from me which is fairly miraculous! I've done a lot of work over the years on my sexual abuse history, including a residential week in Australia. That was when I discovered that I have DID. I first recovered a memory of sexual abuse by my Dad back in 1994, and then some memories of ritual abuse, but they were even more buried than the other memories and much more fragmented.

Unlike many other people with DID, I never lose time and whenever parts take over my body and my mouth, I am still there, still in my head watching it happen. I am very co-conscious. It's very rare that my parts

come out outside the therapy room: it's all quite controlled and I feel that I play the role of a kind of 'benevolent jailer' who keeps all these other parts locked away for their good and mine – I just couldn't function in the world if they are all out and about. I'm a vicar, I'm married, I've got kids: I just can't have them out all over the place. So in a way the 2-hour therapy session is the place where they come out and they know it. It's almost as if, when I ring the doorbell, they say to me (the me that is me), "Right, you can sod off now, this is our time!" And they take over from the minute I walk through the door, which is fine and works reasonably well for everyone. I still know what's happening, but sometimes a part comes out and suddenly it feels as if the centre of gravity or my centre of consciousness has shifted, from 'me' to one of those parts. And then that part is as much me as the other 'me'. So suddenly I find myself in *that* part looking at the me that I normally am, thinking, "That's not the *real* me." It's quite confusing when it happens.

I sort of expected when I came to the PODS day that all of the other people with DID would be virtually in straitjackets ... And they weren't. They were just like me. Most of them presented just as normal people who seemed very self-aware and high functioning. The people I met and identified with were all women but that didn't seem to make any difference to me. As people sat and talked about what it was like living with DID, I didn't think, "That's not how it is for me because I'm a man" – I've got DID and I identify with other people who have got DID. So for me it feels that my maleness is irrelevant to it. I'm not a macho kind of bloke so perhaps I'm less bothered than others about the fact that there are so few men around. In the same way that gender is irrelevant to being alcoholic or having cancer, I don't think DID is any different in men and

women – it's the same experience in both. But I do have some protector parts that can be quite aggressive, which might be a more male characteristic. In the early days of my marriage, I could be quite violent towards my wife, and I didn't realise at the time that they were 'parts' coming out, because I was co-conscious throughout, and it seemed reasonable to me at the time that I was behaving the way I was. I certainly have a couple of separate parts that come out when I feel threatened and they are just very defensive, argumentative and aggressive. At least half of my parts are protectors like this. I think the manifestation of them in a man is probably more intimidating than it is in a woman, because of the 'vehicle' that they're in. If you've got a part that is behaving all aggressively and is in a six foot tall body, obviously that's going to be harder to deal with than in a woman who's five foot four.

Chris

I realised I had issues from very early on, from about 8 or 9 years old. But I didn't realise that I had DID until I was about 16 or 17, when I got to the point where I knew something definitely wasn't right. I didn't get a diagnosis though until years later. I would find that counsellors were scared by it, and I didn't want people thinking I was mad. I ping-ponged between various counsellors for years, because I never got to the root problem and I would just keep getting treated for depression.

In about 2001/2002 I was going through a really difficult time and I was working as a policeman, and my dream at the time was to join the firearms or police dog unit. To do that you have to disclose your medical records and I didn't want counselling to appear on them, so I went privately and worked with a

really good therapist who first identified a dissociative disorder. I avoided all local mental health services like the plague until about 4 or 5 years ago when things got really bad and I was diagnosed with DID by my counsellor, who was also a forensic psychiatrist. But my experiences of the local Community Mental Health Team were awful. They were in the middle of quite an expensive restructuring, so I ended up seeing one psychiatrist for about 3 sessions, once a month for half an

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hour. She was a locum, so after a few months I saw someone else for two sessions, then someone else. One psychiatrist told me that DID was a load of nonsense. Another would basically ignore me for 25 minutes and then in the last 5 minutes say, "Take this medication and you'll be fine." I didn't take what they gave me, because I knew that pills weren't the answer.

I had a lot of trouble finding a counsellor who would work me because I was a man. They'd always dealt with women who'd been abused and they were uncomfortable taking me on – they'd say, "We don't

generally work with men," or "We don't work with men at all because we're a feminist organisation," or "We don't know *how* to work with men." So I was trying to find a rape counsellor and the feedback I got was that although female rape is acknowledged nowadays in our society, male rape is still a big taboo. So men don't come forward to talk about it because there is so much stigma, and therefore counsellors don't have the experience of working with them.

Talking to other people about dissociation has been difficult. There was the book and the film made about *Sybil* and every time you try to explain DID, people say, "Oh yes, just like *Sybil*?" and you want to scream, "No!" It drives me crazy when people think it's just like that. My best friend, bless him, he went out and bought the book so he could understand me better, and I kept saying, "For f***'s sake, no, if you want to understand it better, ask *me* about it!" My DID isn't evident to people around me. One of my good female friends said it was like I had really bad PMT – they just couldn't see how much I was struggling below the surface. The other thing I get from people a lot is, "Oh, it's like schizophrenia then?" and it's hard to shift people's thinking and get them to understand what DID really is, rather than what they think it is or what the media say it is.

I even had trouble with people who are experienced in this field. I went for an assessment and they didn't understand me, they just didn't get me at all. They agreed that I was dissociative, but after a two-hour interview they decided that I was 'dangerous' as well. The concern was that because I was dissociating and I was a sexual abuse survivor, then there was a possibility that I would become an abuser myself. I thought, "This is crazy!" because there's been

absolutely nothing in my present or my past about that, and there certainly won't be in my future. None of the counsellors I've seen have ever had that concern about me, so it felt really stigmatising and I'm not sure that the same accusation would be levelled against a woman.

When as men we go for rape counselling, many of us can't cry or show that we're struggling. It feels socially acceptable for women to show their emotions, but not us men. Even though I know it's ridiculous, I still can't cry in front of other people. I hate myself if I start. The social perception of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman is crazy – but even though I know it's crazy, it does play a big part. When I first went for counselling, I felt a bit of a jess. I thought that counselling was all too touchy-feely and I thought, "I don't like this". And then if they hit on something and I started to well-up, I used to really hate myself and think, "They must think I'm a right wimp." It bothered me a lot to be vulnerable.

I certainly think that much of the structure is set up for women as well, and it's more acceptable for them to go and find help. Most of the counsellors are women, and most of their experience is with women. When I was sitting in waiting rooms, it was rare to see another guy come through the door. I don't think that's anyone's fault but our own, as men. We've got this sort of bravado and we let it get in the way – I certainly did for many years. I'm quite a big, burly, six foot plus guy, and going in there and crying in front of somebody made me feel like a complete failure.

It's a societal thing too though that stops men getting or seeking help. Everywhere you look in society, women are more sexualised than men – on posters, billboards, magazines and so on. It's almost drilled into you that women are sex

objects, which of course is wrong. But men aren't, and so guys struggle when they are sexually abused, because that's not the way it works. For a guy to be treated as a sexual object just comes across as completely wrong, like it doesn't fit at all. Of course it's totally wrong for a woman to be sexualised and abused too – but it's as if people don't accept that male rape happens at all, because there's almost no model for it in society. I know a lot of people who refuse to accept that it happens.

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Even when I was working in the police, there was a guy who came into the police station and spoke to an officer on the desk, and he said that he'd been raped. And the detective asked him if he was gay – and insinuated that it wouldn't be as bad if he was! I think the whole attitude between men being abused and women being abused is completely different.

I've heard that a lot of female survivors end up in the mental health system, whereas a lot of male survivors end up in the criminal

justice system, and that's what happened with me. I ended up getting to the stage where I'd bottled and bottled it up and eventually I just blew. I went off on a complete bender. I ended up going out and getting into a lot of trouble, and I was arrested by my colleagues. So it lost me my job, and subsequently my home and my marriage too. I look back and think, "If only I'd dealt with it a bit better, a bit earlier, then it wouldn't have happened." But I'd let things build up for so long, and it was only after it happened that I realised that I needed to tackle it properly. During that period, it was so bad that I couldn't even tell you where I was or what I was doing for days at a time. Dissociation completely ruled my life, and it was horrific.

I've learned to deal with things a lot better now. I've got better coping mechanisms and I've learned to recognise the signs of when things are heading downhill. I used to just accept that I was going to have an episode like there was nothing I could do about it, but nowadays it's a lot different. Things have calmed down hugely. And that's mainly because I've been able to get to the root cause of my issues, which was the abuse. Being able to talk about those things, getting it off my chest, finding out why I was acting the way I was, drawing correlations back to the abuse – all of that has helped enormously.

I really benefitted from going to a male survivors' group. Sitting in a session and listening to other guys talking about stuff was so liberating. You suddenly come out with, "Oh yeah, I do that!" and "I think that way too!" Having a group of guys around me and realising that I'm not unusual, that it's not just me that thinks this or does that – it helped enormously.

[The names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.]