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# 'I can finally look forward to the future'

*A traumatic childhood led Melanie Goodwin, 59, from Norfolk, to develop several personalities – known as dissociative identity disorder. Here, she talks about her experience and reclaiming her life*

WORDS Mary Salmon



**T**o an onlooker, my life appeared normal. I was a mother-of-four with a loving husband; I had a part-time job in my local library; I ran a couple of playgroups and I was also chair of the local Parent Teacher Association. One thing others might have picked up on was how abnormally busy I was – I kept myself going for up to 18 hours every day. Although I didn't know it at the time, filling every minute was how I held myself together.

'Then, when I was aged 40, my younger sister tragically died in a car accident. Shortly afterwards, my world fell apart. I was in mourning, but I also began having terrifying flashbacks and often felt as if other people had taken over my body, a condition that I later learned was called dissociative identity disorder

(DID), formerly known as multiple personality disorder.'

## Blocking out the past

'Like most people who develop DID, I was badly abused when growing up. For me it was sexual abuse by more than one person, which ended when I was 16. I was told I was to blame and that my sister and I would be hurt or even killed if I spoke up.

'Throughout the years of abuse, I developed several inner personalities of various ages. Their role was to hold and hide the memories of the dreadful things that had happened to me. When the abuse was about to start, I'd switch into an alternative personality. With no memory of it happening afterwards, I couldn't tell anyone about it, and nobody around me picked up on any clues.'

“I BEGAN HAVING FLASHBACKS AND FELT OTHER PEOPLE HAD TAKEN OVER MY BODY”

'With DID as my protection, I could have some quality of life. I can now see that this was a normal and healthy reaction when life is perceived as unbearable, especially for a prolonged amount of time. It is an unconscious defence mechanism which prevented me from remembering the terrible things that I couldn't cope with.

'For a time after the abuse stopped, these alternative personalities were kept under wraps in my subconscious mind. But the death of my sister was a trigger that made my coping structure fall apart.

Everyday things such as smells, people's mannerisms and ordinary life triggered fragments of memories, causing the personalities to come out again and take

over my body. The personalities weren't aware of me or of each other.

'For example, when my anxiety levels at work rose due to a perceived threat, such as someone looking like one of my abusers, "Penny" – whose role it was to live only in the present so she had no memories of the abuse – would take over and do things like delete all my work emails. She had no idea that she might need them. For her, there was no past and no future.

'Another personality who became dominant was "Louise". She was anorexic and I lost lots of weight. She wanted to get back to just *existing* – her way of trying to have some control over the trauma she had suffered. Other times, at work, a young girl inside me called "Izzie" might come out because she felt threatened – again, reacting to things that were really harmless. She would run to the toilet and then just curl up in a corner.

'When other personalities came out at work, I usually managed to break through into consciousness. Of course, I was constantly covering up for my strange behaviour. For example, I'd make fun of myself and tell colleagues how silly I was, having pressed the wrong button to delete all my emails. People were sometimes annoyed with me, but as I'd been very effective at work before and they could see things had changed since my sister died, they were quite forgiving.

'When an alternative personality had been out, I could never remember what had happened – but I was aware that my life and thoughts didn't have continuity. In order to maintain some control, I organised my life in a rigid routine so I could try to pick up where I had left off. To keep track, I constantly had to observe in great detail what was happening around me.

'When I got home from work, the personalities who mostly remained hidden during the day were desperate to have some time to do the things they wanted. Of an

evening, one might like to curl up under a blanket, another wanted to do a jigsaw, and another wanted to read or watch soap operas on TV.

'For my family, it must have been awful. When I started to experience symptoms, my children – three boys and a girl – were aged from eight to 15. I couldn't explain to them what was happening as I had no idea myself. My husband Terry, now 64 – who runs a kitchen business – got much more involved

with taking care of the family. He knows about my past and has been very supportive and understanding throughout everything.'

**“I COULDN'T EXPLAIN TO MY CHILDREN WHAT WAS HAPPENING AS I HAD NO IDEA MYSELF”**



Having therapy has helped Melanie live with her multiple personalities; now she's looking forward to the future

### A long journey

'I did seek help early on. I saw a counsellor and went to my GP and a psychiatrist. None of them knew what was wrong. I lived in this state and suffered terribly for four years, until I came across a book about DID in the library. Knowing what was wrong didn't end the pain, but it was the beginning of a long journey back to wellness again.

'Thankfully, after I had diagnosed myself, I found a therapist in my area who worked with people affected by DID. It was a huge relief to find someone who knew and understood the condition. It was like coming home, although it took a few years of therapy for my symptoms to subside.

'After building up a relationship of trust, my therapist provided a safe place for each of my personalities to come out and explore the trauma they had suffered and the reasons they behaved in the way they did. I've now had 13 years of therapy and it continues.

'Little by little, I began to reclaim my brain, my body and myself. Integrating the personalities so they were aware of each other and could communicate was also part of the treatment. At first, we wrote to each other and sometimes used drawing and play to express what had happened. While each person is still a part of me, we share the thinking now. We live in a community that agrees and wants the same things. Without the different personalities, I wouldn't have survived.

'I'm troubled by the fact that there are thousands of people with undiagnosed DID who aren't getting help. Too often, it is confused with conditions like schizophrenia. While many psychiatrists recognise DID, others don't have the right training.

'I'm still building bridges with my children for the time lost. They're adults now and know what happened to me, though we find it hard to talk about. I have grandchildren, whom I love spending time with. While I still keep myself busy, I'm not manic like before. I'm more serene and grateful since having therapy.

'Now for the first time, aged 59, I'm looking forward to a future. I'd like to study science and am excited about life. I'm determined the rest of my time will be good.' **T**

*Melanie is chairperson of First Person Plural, which helps dissociative survivors of trauma and abuse; [www.firstpersonplural.org.uk](http://www.firstpersonplural.org.uk). You can buy the booklet Understanding Dissociative Disorders from [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk).*