



# Living with Dissociative Identity Disorder: One Woman's Experience

By Olga R. Trujillo, J.D.

---

## About the Author

Olga Trujillo is a survivor and an attorney, who after 13 years at the US Department of Justice founded, O.R.T. Solutions, Inc., a consulting practice focused on enhancing responses to end violence against women and children. Olga presents on this and other sexual violence issues around the country. She recently released an educational video on her experience of violence and survival. To learn more about Olga's work, O.R.T. Solutions, Inc., or to order a video please visit [www.ortsolutions.org](http://www.ortsolutions.org) or contact her at [olga@ortsolutions.org](mailto:olga@ortsolutions.org).

## For more information about Dissociative Identity Disorder

For more information about Dissociative Identity Disorder contact the Sidran Foundation at [www.sidranfoundation.org](http://www.sidranfoundation.org) and the International Society for the Study of Dissociation at [www.issd.org](http://www.issd.org).

I was diagnosed with DID when I was in my early thirties as I was going through a life altering journey. The more I learned about this disorder, the more my life experiences made sense to me. Since then, I have worked hard to understand DID, how I developed it, how I lived with it and the impact it has had on my life. I share my story for several reasons: first, to put a human face on this disorder; second, to build awareness and understanding; third, to help those working with individuals who may have DID; and fourth, to provide support to individuals struggling with the disorder.

## What is Dissociative Identity Disorder?

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), once referred to as Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), is not the mysterious psychiatric illness that many might think it is. The stigma associated with DID or MPD comes from a lack of understanding about the disorder and from inaccurate depictions in movies and on television where individuals with DID are portrayed as dangerous and mentally disturbed with fragmented personalities acting in shocking and uncontrollable ways. This disorder is not the catastrophic affliction that it is often made out to be. Individuals with DID are ordinary people in our society, who have endured over-

whelming traumatic events. Although they don't often see themselves this way, they are "generally highly intelligent, creative, brave, articulate and likable." Individuals with DID span across all socio economic, racial and ethnic groups. They are people you know, your co-workers, members of your church, your community, your school. They are mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, friends and acquaintances. "You can have DID and still complete your college education, hold down a responsible job, get married, be a good parent, and have a circle of close friends. And best of all, you can recover."



To understand DID, you first need to understand dissociation, the underlying act that can lead to the disorder. Dissociation is a mental process, which produces a lack of connection in a person's thoughts – separating out an individual's emotions, physical feelings, responses, actions, or sense of identity. While the person is dissociating, some information – particularly the circumstances associated with traumatic events -- is not associated with other information as it normally would be. It is held in some peripheral awareness. Dissociation runs along a continuum, which reflects a wide range of experiences and/or symptoms. Most of us experience mild symptoms of dissociation in our everyday life such as daydreaming, getting lost in a movie or a book, and losing track of time. How many of you have driven to work and didn't remember the trip? You were somewhere else. These are all examples of dissociation and a mild form of amnesia. Then there are many people who experience a moderate degree of symptoms but do not necessarily have a dissociative illness. On the other end of the spectrum are individuals with dissociative disorders who have developed separate personality states or identities within their mind.

"Severe symptoms are found mainly in people who have experienced overwhelmingly traumatic situations from which there was no physical escape, resorting to "going away" in their head." This is most commonly used by children as an extremely effective defense against acute physical and emotional pain, or anxious anticipation of that pain. "It is considered a highly creative survival technique because it allows an individual enduring hopeless circumstances to preserve some areas of healthy functioning." When the abuse continues over time, dissociation can become reinforced and conditioned. This effective strategy may ultimately become an automatic response whenever the individual is "triggered" by a situation. In other words, the individual may automatically dissociate when a particular environment or event matches a previous event that was traumatic and the person thereby feels threatened or anxious, even if the situation is not perceived as threatening by anyone else.

## **My Journey Begins**

In 1993, my life profoundly changed. I was 31 years old, married and had just become the youngest career General Counsel at the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Jus-

tice Programs and the only Latina to hold that position. It was an amazing accomplishment for me. I was in the best place I had ever been in my life, and it was the safest I had ever felt. I had no idea how safe until many years later.



That January, I began a journey I never imagined I would take. It started with panic attacks and flashbacks of what I later came to realize was a violently tragic childhood. Soon I was flooded with memories of a young life full of violations and attacks by my family. I began remembering vicious rapes I suffered by my brothers and their friends and torturous acts, beatings and sexual abuse by my father and other men he brought into our home. As I gathered these memories, I felt my life unravel. My world would never be the same.

I worked intensely with a psychiatrist to recover my memories and integrate them into who I am today. I learned that I survived the horror of my childhood and adolescence by dissociating or “spacing out” and separating aspects of each particular violation – the physical pain, the look on my father’s face, the acts of humiliation, the terror, the rage, everything -- from the rest of my mind.

### **Learning to Dissociate**

Although many have heard of dissociation, it is a concept that can be difficult to understand fully. For that reason, I decided to try to describe it from “an inside-out” perspective. My hope is that it will help others to better understand the process. The best way I know to describe dissociation is to explain how I experienced it.

When an attack was too traumatic for me to experience and live with, I would cognitively leave my body and observe the incident from outside myself. Then I put the scene of what I had experienced, as if it were a movie clip, into a mental drawer and closed it. At first, I would place whole incidents in one of these imaginary drawers. But as the attacks became more brutal and vicious, I could not observe them -- even from a distance as if they were happening to someone else. I started breaking down the attacks and putting aspects of them into separate imaginary drawers in my head.



For example, many times when I was growing up my father assaulted me when I was bathing. The first time it happened, I was eight years old. I was showering when my father came into the bathroom and got into the shower with me. My immediate response was to panic. I knew he was there to hurt me. I reacted by separating myself off cognitively and pulling apart all the aspects of this attack. I put the panicked feeling in one drawer. I put the look on my father's face in another. I put the look of his naked body in another drawer. I put the tub with running water in another drawer. I put the shower-head with streaming water coming down in still another. I put the pain I felt as he raped me in a drawer. I put the pain I felt as he sodomized me in yet another drawer. I put the look of my fingers getting all shriveled up from being in the water too long in a drawer. I put the feeling of shivering in still another. By the time the attack was over, I had created some 20 drawers to hold all the pieces of the attack I had just endured – the shame, the vulnerability, the rage, the despair.

Each drawer would be shut, not to be opened, until a similar attack, pain, look, feeling or place that matched what was already in a drawer. Then the drawer would open to allow me to put more in and to respond in the manner I did when the drawer was originally created. Because the response was successful enough to help me survive, I would repeat the response whenever something "triggered" me. That is when something – a feeling, a smell, a room, or an incident -- matched something that was already in a drawer. I also learned to dissociate earlier and earlier when an attack became routine. I was attacked so many times while I was in the bathroom, that eventually I would begin to dissociate, or leave my body, as soon as I entered the bathroom or even before then,

when I realized I would need to enter the bathroom.



### **From Dissociation to Dissociative Disorder**

These drawers then became separate parts of my mind. In other words, I would break up a particular attack and separate the pieces from the rest of me. I compartmentalized everything from the attacks, and would not allow myself to access any of it, unless I was triggered by a similar event. I blocked it out from my consciousness.

Once triggered, the part of my mind that was in the drawer became more present and would take care of the situation.

When a drawer opened, I often only had access to what I did to survive and not any aspects of the traumatic event tucked inside. For example, I learned early in my life that fighting against a rape only left me brutally beaten and could have been fatal for me. So the response I created was to accommodate the rape – by not fighting and making it easier for the attacker. As an adolescent and young adult I was raped many times. At the point these attacks felt similar to the rapes I experienced as a child, I would respond by accommodating. Generally, that triggering event was when the rapists overpowered me. Then a drawer would open, I would dissociate and accommodate the rape. I would not fight back. I would say and do whatever I believed the rapists wanted in order to get it over with as quickly as possible. I wouldn't remember all the similar attacks that came

before. A familiar event would trigger this familiar response. Afterwards, I would place all the specifics of that attack in separate drawers and shut them.

My young life was so full of violence and terror that I perfected this skill of creating drawers and filing them with all aspects of these traumatic attacks. The drawers soon held so much information that they became “aspects” of me. I became a person made up of many “aspects” of myself that many in the trauma field would call “alters” and others might call “personality states”. My life had become a management of the opening and closing of the drawers in order for different aspects of myself to respond to whatever situation I faced.

## **The Recovery Process**

I worked for years with a psychiatrist to open each drawer and gather the experiences inside. The work was excruciating, long and at times devastating. Through this intense work, I recovered my memories and gained access to the pieces of my shattered life. As I spoke about each attack that so traumatized me, experienced the emotions and felt the physical pain, the need for the separateness (or the drawer as I described it) disappeared and the reality of what happened, the pain and the emotions became a part of me. As I went through the memories of each incident, I have been able to integrate these “alters” into who I am today making me more whole.



Through this process I learned to pay attention to what was happening inside me: to the memories, the physical pain, the emotional reactions. With this I was better able to recognize when an aspect of my mind was present. I learned to make room for these aspects as they came forward. I learned to respect them. I learned to trust that I could get through the memories that I had sectioned off in my head. I have come to recognize that these aspects were created to protect me from the unimaginable cruelties inflicted on me. I learned to not fight the memories and to not minimize the power of these aspects of me. Through this work, I gained more confidence than I ever had or even imagined I could have.

Today, at age 43, I don't believe I have remembered all the horror of my past. However, I have recovered much of my youth. I also believe I will continue to remember new incidents of abuse and torture that I will have to confront. It seems likely that I will always find new aspects of myself. Over the past 12 years, with the help of my psychiatrist, I have come to see the tool of dissociation that I have perfected as a gift.

When I first realized there were aspects of me that I didn't know about and would appear whenever I was triggered, I was terrified. But over the years, I have come to realize that had I not had the creativity to separate the horrors of my past from the rest of

me, I would not be alive today. I would not have been able to get up every morning, go to school, come home and go to sleep every night. If I had known of how horrible my life was as a child, I know I would not have survived, and I most certainly would not be sane now. I've come to appreciate these aspects of me and have learned to seek them out and be open to what they bring to me as part of growing and healing from the past.



### **How it felt to have the disorder**

After I started the work of recovering the memories and experiences I suffered growing up, I realized that things I felt, and never talked about, weren't things everyone experienced. They were part of the DID. And knowing that I was DID helped me to understand these strange experiences. For example, I remember often looking into a mirror and being surprised at who I saw. I often felt that who I looked like and who I felt like didn't match up. At times, I felt like a child but I looked like an adult. Sometimes I would look at my hands and think they don't belong to me. Other times it was as if there was a delayed reaction between what I was doing and when I felt I was doing it. For example, when I

would hold someone's hand. I could see I was holding their hand. But I couldn't really feel I was holding their hand. I would feel it a few seconds later – almost as if I were viewing it from a filter.

I often had very conflicting thoughts that didn't make sense. Some seemed like the thoughts of a child, some of an adult, some of an adolescent. For others with DID, I have heard them describe this as having voices in their head. For me, it felt more like lots of competing thoughts or impulses that I needed to negotiate. Another experience I had was never really feeling comfortable in my own skin. I remember thinking that all the time. I used to excuse it as a lack of confidence, but I realized it was so much more than that. Also, I noticed that I felt and acted differently depending on who I was with. I noticed this one-day, years ago when I was having lunch with a couple of friends. One friend commented on how easy going she found me. The second friend laughed and said "are you talking about the same Olga I know? She has to have control over everything. Easy going is the last way I would describe her." Now, I find this all so curious. Clearly these were clues to me that there was something wrong, but I just didn't know that others didn't experience the same thing. When I was in therapy and I explained these feelings to my psychiatrist, it helped confirm to him that DID was an issue for me.



## Living with DID

Living with Dissociative Identity Disorder isn't easy. I have had to learn about the types of situations that can be triggering for me. I try to anticipate these situations and handle them as best I can. For example, crowds are very hard for me. Sometimes, the feeling of a crowd can trigger the feelings I had when I was gang raped. When I'm going into a situation that will be crowded, I try to make sure there are a few people there on whom I can rely to stay with me; this helps me to stay present and feel safe. Some crowds I'll avoid altogether, rather than risk the panic attack that may ensue. Some of the simplest things can present potential triggering situations for me. Going to the grocery store can be very hard. The combination of crowds and looking at all the various goods to buy can easily overwhelm me. To deal with this, I plan ahead. I know that when I am fatigued I am more easily triggered. During those times, I don't go to the grocery store. It also helps to shop during off hours. Shopping is much easier if someone I know and trust accompanies me.



The sensation of being trapped can trigger feelings from the many rapes I've suffered. Sometimes flying on a crowded plane in a middle seat or up against the window will bring on the feelings of being held down during these rapes. This can be a difficult situation when you travel 4 times a month, like I do. To avoid the panic, I try to plan ahead, travel the same airline, and plan far ahead to ensure I can get an aisle seat. It also helps to sit close to the front of the plane. When I cannot avoid sitting in the middle or at the window, several things can make it easier. It helps to have someone traveling with me that I can sit next to and feel in the present and comfortable. But when that is not possible, I use imagery and self-hypnosis to keep myself calm and in the present. Music and headphones are also relieve the stress of travel.

There are so many situations that I face everyday that I know can be triggering. I try to anticipate them and maneuver through them as best I can. But, it never ceases to amaze me, and at times frustrate me, when something completely unexpected comes up. But I have learned how to manage the aspects of me when they arise. I often have to negotiate with alters when I realize their presence to get through a particular situation. For example, sitting through a meeting on sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse issues can be very hard and sometimes very triggering. To get through it I may have to bargain with myself. I'll attend this meeting but beforehand, I'll go for a run with a friend, or afterwards, I'll get an ice cream sundae as a reward for getting through it. It's all very natural now. I understand it. I appreciate it, and I have come to terms

with what it means to live with Dissociative Identity Disorder. I am more whole now than I have ever been in my life, and I feel safer than I ever thought I could.

## Relationships and DID

Having healthy, significant relationships is a challenge for anyone, but with someone with DID it has added complexities. I am grateful to have had several significant relationships through my 20's, 30's and now in my 40's. Like most healthy relationships, it takes a lot of work. When I was married, I learned to try to discuss what I was learning about the parts of me with my husband. It was easier for him to understand why I might be behaving in a way that didn't make sense to him, it was also easier for him to support me and have patience. In my relationship now, I have found that the more I learn about what is happening inside me and share that with my partner, the more we can anticipate difficult situations and strategize as to how to handle them. The more information you can give your significant others the better able they are to understand and support you.

The most important fact I realized through my therapy was that trust was very difficult for me. Not surprising, given that most everyone who was supposed to take care of me when I was a child, betrayed me. I had always thought of myself as a trusting person. But as I explored my feelings more deeply, I learned that I never truly believed people were being honest with me. I also never really trusted that people would like me much less love me. I realized that in relationships and friendships I was always waiting for the real person in them

to come out and for them to leave or disappoint me. And so as I would cautiously build relationships with people, but would hide myself from them. I would let them in a little bit at a time and I would watch for consistency between what they were saying and their actions. For me, that was every-thing – that is how I determined whether to let them in more. At the same time I would accommodate them in any way I could to assure that they would not leave me. I tried to make myself even-rything they wanted



to come out and for them to leave or disappoint me. And so as I would cautiously build relationships with people, but would hide myself from them. I would let them in a little bit at a time and I would watch for consistency between what they were saying and their actions. For me, that was every-thing – that is how I determined whether to let them in more. At the same time I would accommodate them in any way I could to assure that they would not leave me. I tried to make myself even-rything they wanted them happy. But in the process, I would lose myself. So I learned to let those with whom I was having significant relationships know about my trust issues. I learned to stay in touch with myself and not become someone else in order to accommodate the relationship. And I learned to talk to my partner and my closest friends about my struggles with trust and with being who I am. It is a process but one that has brought me wonderful relationships and helped me to create a family of my choosing. The support and joy I get from these relationships has helped me get through some very difficult times.

Now, in the present, after years of excruciatingly painful work to recover the memories of my childhood, I am a remarkably different person. I am a more whole person with a



more complete sense of who I am and how I got here. I am a person who has accepted the darkness and reveled in the brightness of my life. Over the last dozen years, I have pieced together a young life filled with abuse – physical, emotional, sexual and ritual. I came to realize the blank spaces of my childhood that before I could not see were full of torture, rape, incest, forced prostitution, animal abuse, murder attempts and more cruelty than I could bare to think about. I am grateful for the creativity I had to dissociate. I am thankful that I had the strength to survive the attacks I suffered and to have the courage to face them again as an adult. The work is very hard, but the reward of taking my life back – the darkness and the joy – has been well worth the journey. At the time I started, I was in the safest place I had ever been. By doing this work, I have reached levels of safety and happiness I couldn't even imagine were possible.

