

## My Experience as a Partner of Dissociative Survivor

by Rob Spring

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A 'dissociative survivor'? What a label! It's one that has little or no meaning to everyday folk. And yet to us, their partners, it means so much. It describes two very difficult, almost indescribable, aspects of the life of the person that we have chosen, for better or for worse, to love and support.

Dissociation and DID have had a profound, life-changing impact on my wife, myself and the very nature of our marriage. She lives with, and I observe and increasingly understand it to be, an amazing, defensive and adaptive response of the mind. The child's mind had to cope with such unbearable trauma that it necessitated a fragmentation of the core of the self.

A 'survivor' of what? From my partner's experience and from what I have read and learned, to use the word 'survivor' seems most appropriate. People with a dissociative disorder have used all their early resources to bear overwhelming physical, emotional and sexual abuse. They have endured and survived what most 'nice' people don't even want to start to comprehend can happen to a child. And mostly at the hands of the people who should have been their loving caregivers.

My experience of 'alters' and their stories of trauma and abuse has been a 5 year journey taken in relative isolation. Although I have built relationships with my wife's alters and have some good support, I look back and imagine how different it might have been if I had known other partners who could identify with what I was, and still am, going through. Family, friends and other well-meaning people could never really understand what living with DID and the effects of complex trauma are like.

What has it been like for me? The early days were filled with confusion, disbelief and panic; a sense of *where has my wife gone?* They have gradually been replaced by greater understanding and compassion but also with varying degrees of secondary traumatic stress. Five years on from the emergence of my partner's DID, my worldview has changed, and I know that my sense of 'normal life' will never be the same as before.

My sense of isolation has been tempered now by getting to know other partners, as well as many people with DID, and therapists working in the field. I have realised how 'normal' my experiences, and those of my wife, are – both how her DID manifests and the kinds of experiences in early childhood that led to it. I have huge respect not just for her but for everyone who has survived sexual abuse. Far from being 'mad', my wife is the most sane person I know! – and it is by means of dissociation, from a cutting-off of her mind from the atrocities that she suffered, that she has been able to survive and now largely to recover.

To read more of my story, as published in the September 2009 edition of *Interact*, the journal of the Trauma and Abuse Group (TAG), please [email](#) me.

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