

Support – Looking after myself

Think about what the word 'support' means for you. Am I clear about what I can expect from the different types of support I have available? I understand support from my therapist will be very different to the role of a support worker, colleagues, friends and partner.

Being clear how the different roles will offer different things; this may help you to feel empowered and prevent very painful situations triggered by misunderstandings. These often happen at times when you are at your most vulnerable and although it is impossible to pre-empt all difficult situations, giving some thought to this may help to mitigate the inevitable misunderstandings. Learning to be able to identify and then talk about what is happening is so important. For many it will be totally alien in the early days of your journey; a new skill that may require a lot of work.

Do my support needs vary at different times? Maybe certain dates are difficult? How can I put appropriate support in place for these times?

Internal support

Look back over the years and identify what you have naturally/habitually done to help you to restabilise and to feel more grounded and safe. Many stabilising skills are not identified as such; it is something you 'just do'. Identifying and labelling them as coping strategies may help them to be consciously accessed when needed.

Some coping strategies, like self-harm, may feel quite negative. Understanding why this is the default position and seen as helpful by some parts, may put it into context, allowing the beginning of acknowledgement and acceptance. Working together to consider alternative options may become a real possibility. This can lead to change or adapting certain behaviours. As with most things, internal communication is so important, as imposed rather than agreed change is rarely sustainable. Tiny steps need celebrating.

External Support

If you have external support be sure you both/all understand what is going to be helpful and realistic. Being offered something that is not sustainable can be very painful and detrimental to your well-being. These discussions need to take place when you are not in crisis. It might be possible to have extra support at certain times e.g. trigger dates. These need to be time limited with clear boundaries that are adhered to. During discussions it is important that as many parts as possible are included and to find a way of letting those who are unable to be present know the decisions that have been made.

Reflect on current relationships - are they helpful? Maybe you are always compromising, being complicit in a way that is unhelpful or unhealthy; some situations may even be quite volatile. Do I need to think about how I manage certain relationships - are they more harmful than beneficial? What do I get from them? Do I need them?

It can be so hard to identify those relationships that are unhelpful and then take steps to change or remove them from your life. To survive we had to be compliant at a certain level

and this has become hardwired into our overall development, an organic response. Quick fixes and habitual responses may produce outcomes that prevent more pain in the short term but longer term they can cause a lot of anguish. Identifying and changing 'old habits' is tough and needs to be done slowly, respectfully and with care. At this stage of the journey recognising their merits first rather than condemning them is helpful.

Learning to be really honest with yourselves will often be new and challenging. Many behaviours and reactions are logical when understood within the context in which they became established. Co-operation and communication are so important, imposed control is rarely, if ever, sustainable. This will be work in progress; celebrate the many small steps that will be taken and be compassionate with yourselves when things seem to be even harder and more chaotic.

Can I talk through these difficulties with the person concerned or do I feel this is not possible or even feel too intimidated to try?

Discussing sensitive areas is hard for everybody but DID brings many other levels of challenge. Some parts might be firmly attached to someone who others experience as an unhealthy relationship. This needs to be unpicked very carefully and slowly.

Are there some relationships that I need to end or temporarily pause?

Some relationships, possibly long-term friendships, can be hard to sustain when the friend struggles to understand DID. Is this friendship important to you on other levels? Maybe you have things in common going back many years that you value. An unspoken compromise might be possible but be honest with yourselves about the price you are paying to do this.

Can I find the words to talk about boundaries with all of my potential, external support system? Is this realistic and 'normal'?

It is so important to talk these boundaries through so all of you can have a feel as to what you can expect from each individual. Of course, the word boundary might not be used. This can be challenging but persevering to obtain this clarity can help to prevent painful and unhelpful misunderstandings or complete breakdowns in communication. Allow yourself to be honest with yourselves and listen internally to each other. Some relationships will be more natural and intuitive, and you will learn to trust your healthy, developing instincts.

Personal relationships are so much more complex and challenging. What does this relationship mean to both of you and how can you get your needs met while at the same time discussing your partner's needs? How you can meet your partner's needs maybe limited at times. Honesty and feeling sad amongst many other feelings are real and OK.

At times it might just not be possible to have empathy towards their needs - recognise and discuss this. Be really honest with yourselves and your partner. DID can be all encompassing. Learning to be able to reach out and at least be aware of others' needs is a good place to start. Within every relationship there will be times when one partner may need to care for another. This is normal, natural, okay and a two-way process. Whenever possible try and work as a partnership, as equals.

How much 'should' I tell my child/children?

This needs to be age appropriate and something with which you are comfortable. Be honest but remember this must not become their responsibility. Letting parts meet and play with your inner family is a very personal choice. Ask yourselves does this feel right? An age appropriate explanation of what happens can remove some of the fear and worry. It is a sensitive path you walk; you are first and foremost the parent and what is right for you and your child/children might not work for others in a similar situation.

How can I be the parent I want to be when sometimes I hardly know how to keep going?

Parenting is tough but also rewarding. If you are a single parent it will help if there is an external support system in place that you can call upon during those times. What you need and what is possible needs to be discussed when you are not in crisis. Learning to identify warning signs that it is about to get difficult and taking the agreed actions to ensure your child/children is/are cared for during these times is one of the most important things you can do. Anticipating and preparing for times of crisis often makes those times a lot shorter. It is empowering as you are reclaiming your life.

With increasing insight into how you manage everyday living there are often set times, like dates, that will be difficult. There are times that are less well defined, e.g. emerging memories that may cause you to become destabilised for a short while. Predicting and identifying those potential times can be empowering; a planned time when you will not be available as a parent is so much easier for you and your child/children to accept and manage.

Many of you will not have access to safe support outside your family. This is so much harder to manage and meet your own and your child/children's needs. Trying to develop a structure in your day that has built-in time for you could be one way of beginning to address this. It is hard work, especially in the early days but persevering and being open to change may help to alleviate the feeling of being overwhelmed by internal and external demands on your daily finite amount of time. Developing a structured day requires both internal and external co-operation, as well as ongoing communication supported by a sense of commitment.

If you have a partner, you need to work on how you will sustain being a united parenting partnership. You are both adults in this partnership. Discussing how you will manage the times when you might not be able to engage in parenting, so the younger family members are not worried or anxious. It is part of their lives.

How you can work together to give your family the least disruptive experience while acknowledging there will be times when you will need to step back is important, requiring open and honest discussions.

All the ideas shared here are just that, 'ideas'. Some, none, or all might work for you. Hopefully even if none resonate it might give you ideas about what might work for you and your system. All of these are a 'working towards'. This may be achieved quite easily and quickly, or take years, taking a few steps forward and then back to the status quo or what feels safe before venturing out again. Reading something like this can feel prescriptive; that is unhelpful. As always FPP offers and shares ideas and welcomes your thoughts and feedback, maybe something for our newsletter? Wishing you well and hope something here has helped a little.