



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

## BOUNDARIES GETTING OUT OF CONTROL WITH A THERAPIST

I've always been considered 'needy'. I have a habit of getting involved in really intense relationships, and at various times I've been labelled as 'borderline'. I'm beginning to understand it more in terms of attachment, which feels less shameful than being told that there's something fundamentally wrong with your personality. But most of the time I hate being me. The biggest difficulty I have is managing the relationship with my therapist. I feel like I'm too much for her a lot of the time, and I'm not sure how to handle the boundaries. Some of the time it feels so persecutory when she doesn't respond to a text or an email in between sessions, and we've got into a mess several times when I've been texting or emailing her

increasingly frequently. Then she gets to the point where she can't deal with it any more (because I'm sending dozens of messages a day) and she tries a different approach, with no contact in between sessions. Usually I go into meltdown for a while, feel punished, and withdraw.

On the one hand I know that I push and push and push. On the other, I wish she would just hold the boundaries more firmly. But I know that I can be pretty insistent, and I lash out at her a lot. I don't normally get this angry in my relationships, but the therapeutic relationship seems to bring it out in me. She says that this is all part of the work, but I worry continually that I'm going to overstep the mark once too often and it will all be over. At the same time, although I try not to do it, I feel myself having to test the boundaries.



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

Does she really mean I can't contact her at weekends? What about the times when I've done it and she's responded? Does she mean I can't if it's not serious, but I can if I'm suicidal? I can't cope with the grey zones in that—I'm continually driven towards black or white and all or nothing. I mostly think that I'm just a bad person, and that I'll never be able to have a normal relationship with anyone. But again she keeps reassuring me that there are lots of people, with similar histories to me, who act and think just like I do, so I'm not alone. I don't know whether I feel reassured by that or not. I just wish I could stop. – **By KW**

## INTIMACY

I love my partner very much, but a lot of the time I don't feel anything for her. It's like I'm just shut down emotionally and I can't evoke any feelings for her at all. In my head I know that I'm really lucky to be with her, and she's really supportive and loving towards me. And it's not that I don't like her, or that she annoys me. It's just that I can't feel anything for her. I'm numb and empty. Sometimes we try to make love and nothing happens, or if everything physical works then I'm not present emotionally.

I don't want to hurt her, and she does get hurt sometimes because she says it's like making love to a mannequin. She wants to feel that I'm present with her emotionally but I just go far, far away inside myself

whenever we get intimate. I go through the motions. I feel like a robot. Sometimes the only way to get myself to feel anything is to inflict pain on myself – I wouldn't call it self-harm as such, because I'm not trying to hurt myself. I'm just trying to see if I can actually feel anything. I sometimes think it would be fairer if I just split up with her so that I'm not such a disappointment and so inadequate—she deserves better than me. But whenever we talk about it, she insists that she doesn't want me to leave, and I do love her in my own way. – **By LM**

## DIFFICULTIES HIDING DISSOCIATION AT WORK

I work in a school as a teaching assistant and mostly I enjoy my work, but I find it really difficult to hide my dissociation. I think a lot of my colleagues think I'm just a bit eccentric. I sometimes can't remember what people have said to me, so people think I'm very scatty, but at other times they know I can be really organised. I try to write lots of things down to cover for my memory problems. It's just really disorientating because I might be in a staff meeting and someone might be doing a health and safety briefing or something normal and mundane like that, but then I get triggered (and I don't even know what by a lot of the time) and I go all vague and fuzzy, sometimes for hours afterwards. It's like I fall into a hole within myself and everything goes far away. I know that it's



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

called depersonalisation and derealisation but those terms don't describe how distressing and scary it is.

The worst part is not wanting anyone else to notice. I don't want to lose my job. I don't want people to think I'm nuts. I've got colleagues that I really respect, and I wish I could be like them. Sometimes I find it hard to do even really basic tasks, like laminating and cutting - it's like I lose the use of my fingers and my hand/eye coordination and I become all clumsy. I usually make an excuse, like I need the toilet, or I go and get involved with some children doing something else, but it's the sense of embarrassment that's the worst. Work helps keep me grounded and it's something to look forward to (I hate the holidays) so I desperately want to stay working but I get tied up in knots not knowing whether to say anything to someone about my difficulties, or whether that might make things worse. - **By CF**

## DIFFICULTIES WITH TRUST

I've always had trouble trusting people. I remember being at school, maybe the first year of secondary, and a teacher laughing at me in front of the whole class and saying that my problem was that I just don't trust anyone and that I needed to stop being so paranoid and negative about people. It made me feel that there's something very, very wrong with me that I can't trust

people. But then at other times, I figure that of course I don't trust people - because so many people have hurt and betrayed and abused me. I swing between justifying myself for why I don't trust people, and desperately wanting to.

It's becoming a real problem in therapy. I know the whole thing is supposed to be based on me being able to trust the therapist enough to tell her stuff, and to open up about how I feel, but I just can't do it. I feel like she must constantly be thinking that I'm making it all up, that I'm attention-seeking, that I am just lying to her. And then I get all screwed up trying to figure out how on earth I'm going to prove to her that I'm not. While I'm doing that, the clock keeps ticking and I'm sitting in silence wasting the session.

I'm afraid to like her. I'm afraid to need her. I'm afraid that I'll open up about how I feel and that then she'll think I'm stupid. I'm afraid that if I tell her the stuff that goes on in my head, she'll say I can't come any more. But the worst thing I'm afraid of is telling her some of the really bad stuff, and then her actually believing me - and it mattering to her. I'm stuck in this forwards and backwards feeling of desperately wanting her to believe me, and needing her help, and then spending each session wanting to run like crazy out of there. - **By PF**



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

## ETHICAL DILEMMAS WHEN DISSOCIATION MIGHT AFFECT OTHER PEOPLE

I'm a paediatric nurse and I think I'm good at what I do. I love my work – it's what keeps me going. It means the world to me. But I worry that I shouldn't be working at all. I'm fine when I'm at work – it's as if there's a part of me that comes and takes over, and this 'Apparently Normal Personality' just gets on with my job, stays calm, and everything is fine. But as soon as I get home I go to pieces. I live alone, so no one else sees it, but when I'm off work I'm all over the place, switching to all these different child parts and half the time I'm co-conscious for it, but half the time I'm not. I dread doing something that will expose my secret. I'd be devastated if anyone at work found out what it's like for me at home.

At work I'm so capable, but at home I sometimes can't cope with the smallest things. At work I don't mind at all being in meetings with male superiors. At home I can't even cope with the gas engineer coming around to service the boiler – I'm terrified of him. Given that my work is with such vulnerable children, I worry that it's not ethical for me to be working. But at the same time, so far nothing has affected my work. But what if it does? I'm worried that if I say anything, no one will understand and I'll be given some label of

'mental illness' and treated as if I'm mad, with no allowance for how well I do my job. It's just so hard to explain to anyone that I can be super-competent AND super-incompetent: it depends which part is out. The problem is that I feel like I'm living a double-life, and I'm terrified in case I switch to a traumatised part while I'm in the middle of looking after these really sick babies. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to them because of my dissociation and the anxiety of that is driving me over the edge. – **By SU**

## NOT KNOWING HOW TO STOP AVOIDING TRAUMA WORK

I've been working with my current therapist for about three years. We've done lots of really helpful stuff to help me be able to calm down when I'm triggered, and we've worked with lots of my parts to improve their understanding and acceptance of each other. We're much better at internal communication and cooperation and I don't lose time very much any more. So there's been a lot of progress, although it feels like it's taken forever to get to this point.

We've talked a lot for months now about 'phase two', about how, now that I've got a good foundation of skills in 'phase one' with safety and stabilisation, it could be time to face some of the trauma head on



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

and try to resolve some of it. I still get awful flashbacks, nightmares and body memories, and I don't want to live like this for the rest of my life. I feel like I've been plateauing for a while, so I really want to move forwards, and it makes sense that we move forwards and look at the trauma. But it scares the life out of me too. I get in such a state before every session if we say we're going to face it, and then the session becomes just about getting grounded again. We'll do that for a few weeks and I can spiral downhill rapidly, so then we figure it would be better not to push it, and we back off again. It's really frustrating.

We've started looking at some of my 'core beliefs', of the kinds of things I believe might happen if I start talking. I've realised that I've always believed that they will come and 'get' me if I 'tell'. I can just about grasp with my adult head that they won't now (they're dead) but it's like I can't get that information through to my younger parts. The fear is just so overpowering – it feels like a matter of life and death. One thing that has been really helpful is my therapist saying that I've kept myself safe from the trauma all these years by avoiding it, so avoidance is a habit, and it's one that's been seared into me because of survival. We're starting to do some visualisations of what it might be like to talk about stuff and for it to be okay, to try to convince my back brain and my parts

that it's not a matter of life and death. But I'm just taken aback at how powerful the fear is. – **By JH**

## FEAR OF GOING MAD

My biggest fear is of going mad. I don't want to be locked up in a mental hospital and never let out. I'm always afraid that I'll get sectioned, and then be unable to convince the powers that be that I'm okay, because it would be like the denial trap – 'Ah, so you're in denial that you've got a problem ... that proves that you're mad.' I've found it easier the more I've understood about trauma and dissociation to try to believe that I'm not mad, and that I'm not going mad – I'm just traumatised and distressed, and my body and brain are on high alert to try to keep me safe from being abused again. But when you're being bombarded with flashbacks and body memories and your thoughts are racing at a thousand miles an hour, it's hard not to feel you're mad.

If you try and tell people that you have different alters and that some of them are a different gender, and have different names and ages, then they really do look at you as if you're mad. How do I know that I'm not actually just mad? How do I know that I'm not making all this stuff up? I don't want my kids to be taken away, and I don't want something on my record that stops me having a career, once I can cope with work again. When I've lost time and I don't

# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

know what I've been doing for the last few hours, I'm not so much bothered about what it is that I've been doing as I'm really upset that I'm being 'mad'. It's almost like an obsessive, ruminating thought that just goes around and around – it's quite ironic, I suppose, but I guess the fear of being mad is what I think is sending me mad! –  
**By TM**

## BEING HYPER SELF-CRITICAL AND LACKING COMPASSION FOR PARTS

I've understood in the last year or so that all my parts are part of 'me', even though they don't feel like it, but what I can't seem to be able to do is to feel anything positive towards them at all. All day, every day, I just hate them. I absolutely loathe them. I wish I could kill them all. They cause me nothing but trouble. I see other people celebrating their parts and being really proud of them, but I just feel this overwhelming sense of shame and dread about mine. Then I feel really bad that I'm so negative towards them, because I wouldn't want to be that negative to any real person.

There are a number of parts that I'm aware of who just cry a lot and, instead of feeling any compassion for them, I just want to scream at them to shut up. Then there are a group of older teenage parts who make me cringe with embarrassment, because they're full of themselves and they're

antagonistic and typically arrogant teenagers. I just feel unreasonably irritated at them! They get me into all sorts of trouble, like drinking too much and spending money that I haven't got, so I'm constantly feeling angry with them.

My therapist says that I've got to be more compassionate and understanding towards them, but I don't know how because it's such an overwhelming feeling of hatred that I have towards them all. My therapist says that I need to be less critical towards myself, but I'm ashamed of being like this – wouldn't everyone? He also says that they have done a truly valuable job in helping me survive and keeping me alive, but although I feel like I'm supposed to be grateful, most of the time I think the cost is too high and I just wish they hadn't. I feel that surely I'm the only person who hates my parts as much as this, but again my therapist says that I'm not and that it's quite common, that it's a way of distancing from the trauma and that it's



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

too scary for me just now to dare to accept them because it feels like they'll take over completely. He says they won't, but I don't trust him – not yet, anyway. – **By MW**

## INTRUSIVE FAMILY

My parents didn't abuse me, but there was still a lot that was really screwy about my upbringing and my family. My parents divorced when I was four, and I didn't see my dad properly for a few years, and then after a couple of years my mother remarried and I've always had a difficult relationship with my stepdad. I was abused by my maternal grandfather, amongst others, and I never told anyone – firstly because it never occurred to me to want to share such a horrible, awful secret; and secondly because I didn't feel close enough to either of my parents to talk to them.

They became aware of the abuse I suffered when I ended up in a psychiatric unit for 6 months in my early twenties. I had had several bouts of 'depression', and I've also been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, but it never seemed to occur to any of the professionals working with me to ask about the possibility of abuse. It was only after a particularly serious suicide attempt a couple of years ago when I ended up being sectioned and detained that the truth came out. I was very fortunate – one of the psychiatric nurses had been on one of Carolyn's courses

and immediately identified my switching, 'regression', flashbacks and reliving of the trauma as a problem with dissociation. The psychiatrist was then very open and got some further input before diagnosing me with dissociative identity disorder. It was horrendous and a relief all at the same time.

After being discharged, I managed to get low-cost counselling from a voluntary organisation that has also been trained by Carolyn, and I've been promised long-term, open-ended therapy. I've really landed on my feet. So the problems I'm experiencing aren't based on getting a diagnosis and the right treatment, as they seem to be for most people. Instead, one of the biggest difficulties I have is my family being really intrusive. My mother wanted to be involved in every care meeting while I was sectioned, and there was nothing I could do (so it seemed) to stop her being there. I tried asking her to let me deal with it on my own, but she said I wasn't in a fit state of mind to be able to make my own decisions. For some reason, that felt really shaming and, after she said it, all the suicidal feelings came back with a vengeance for a few days. The best thing about the counselling I'm getting now is that I'm being treated as an adult, with a right to make choices about my life, and I've been assured that no information will be passed to my family at all.



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various

It feels a lot like I'm being blamed for being 'mad' and causing some kind of stigma to my family. They want me to be 'better' as quickly as possible, and they're very resistant to the idea that my symptoms have been caused by the trauma of sexual abuse. They keep insisting that I'm mentally ill and they talk simply in terms of a chemical imbalance (despite not having a clue what they're talking about). They keep threatening to make a complaint that I'm not on stronger medication, and keep saying that I'm going to become overly dependent on my counsellor if I keep seeing her. They view her as a threat to them in some way. My mother knows when I have counselling, and always texts or messages me straightaway afterwards to ask how it went and what I talked about.

Increasingly I'm realising that although my family might mean well (or at least that's what I'm trying to convince myself), their intrusiveness isn't normal. I'm going to have to deal with it if I'm going to live healthy and free. I don't quite understand it yet, but it feels like I'm being really controlled and that I'm being invited to pretend that the abuse didn't happen, because it makes them uncomfortable. I keep trying to find a way to get the space I need, but increasingly I'm beginning to think I'm going to have to move away or get some distance from them if I'm going to recover. Both my parents are really dismissive of

my diagnosis and print stuff out from the internet about how it's a fad and it doesn't really exist. That really doesn't help. – **By CC**

## HOLDING ONTO HOPE

I've really appreciated reading articles on Carolyn's website and in particular her book *Recovery is My Best Revenge*. Both do give me hope for recovery. I desperately want to recover – I hate my life being so disrupted in the way that it is, and I want to be 'normal'. I don't accept that I have to have therapy for the rest of my life, or that I'm always going to be a suicide risk, or that I'll be in and out psychiatric wards forever. That's what I believe mentally. But what's really hard is holding onto hope when I'm in a dip. Sometimes it's something stressful in my day-to-day life that triggers it, but sometimes it's just that it's so exhausting to have a dissociative disorder. I go through phases when I'm hardly sleeping, night after night. I struggle to look after myself in terms of eating properly. I lose so much time, and life just spirals out of control for weeks on end, and managing that every day means that I get exhausted with it. And when things hit a dip like that, it's really hard to hold onto hope. It's like a big black cloud descends on me and I can't see the sun any more, and nothing I do about it seems to make things any better.



# DIFFICULTIES WE FACE AS SURVIVORS



by Various



A friend points out to me that I just need to get through it because the clouds do always clear eventually, but while it's so dark I can't imagine it getting any better. When I'm in that frame of mind, I get really itchy about anyone trying to encourage me or give me hope – it makes me quite angry. I suppose I get a bit self-pitying, but I just feel alone in it all and it doesn't feel that anyone understands. It makes it hard for anyone to help me because I just push people away. So when I most need help from people, I'm least able to receive that help. What I'm really looking for from them is that sense of hope, for someone to reassure me that it will be

okay eventually, because hope becomes like oil and just runs through my fingers. Over time I've learned to write down how I'm feeling and look back at the positive stuff that I've written down at better times, and that has really helped, but it takes extraordinary effort to make myself do that. – **By RB** •

