

BLOG

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reversing adversity



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring

She is the hated child, sitting across from me, mocking me.

I didn't write this, but when I read it, in an email sent to me by a fellow survivor, the words resonated with my own self-experience. And many of us know it: the dirty, persistent self-hatred that we have for ourselves, these 'parts' of ourselves that we have so needed to disown that many of them have become completely 'other', separate, 'not me'.

In dissociative identity disorder, our divided psyche exists because our experiences were so traumatic and overwhelming that we couldn't 'integrate' them. Instead, we hold these discrete

self-states as separate strands of our consciousness. Over time, many of them took on autonomous, distinct characteristics and developed into 'alter personalities'. It is a way of distancing ourselves from the trauma; it is also a way of distancing ourselves from our feelings, our vulnerabilities and our needs.

At first, my awareness of these 'other' parts of me was via other people, who recounted to me what they had said, what they had done, in those time blanks where I was unaware. Even then, I pushed it away. I didn't really want to know. It sounded mad – it was mad! – and I didn't want to hear that a 'young' part of me calling herself 'Diddy' had been distressed



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring

and distraught. I didn't want to hear that a belligerent, 'adolescent' part called 'Switch' had been wanting to self-harm. I didn't want to know that an unnamed part had sat for hours twiddling the thread of a blanket, impervious to touch or words or eye-contact. I was less disturbed when I found that in my time blanks I had been writing, or cleaning. But even then I didn't really want to know what happened when I wasn't 'here', when I wasn't 'myself'. Perhaps if I didn't know, it would just go away.

After my breakdown in 2005, the not-knowing became more difficult as the time-blanks increased and the invisible activities made themselves visible in the aftermath of overdoses or fugues. Lost in the countryside, I still had to navigate myself back again. The emotions still had to settle and they lingered like reflux in my soul. The not-knowing about who I was and what I did when 'not-me' was convenient at first in evading the embarrassment of my actions but it soon became inconvenient. It caused stress to people who cared about me and did nothing to help restabilise my life.

So I had to start to figure out who these other 'parts' of me were, and I didn't want to. Firstly, there was the denial - 'They're not real, I'm making it up, you're making it up'. Then the avoidance - 'Just

ignore them and they'll go away.' And then the sickening reality that there really were times when I didn't know what I was doing and yet there was this trail of evidence that I'd been doing something and it wasn't at all the kind of thing I usually did ... I eventually hit up against the obviousness of 'me-not-me' and realised that I had to take it seriously, had to face it and confront it and deal with it, rather than pretending like a toddler that peekaboo makes you invisible.

But I hated them. I really, truly hated them. I did not want to be vulnerable as 'Diddy' any more than I wanted to be twisted-up as 'Switch'. I just wanted to be me - capable, competent and professional me. Except, starting in 2005, I seemed to have lost that capable, competent me and my days were a mashed-up existence of here-and-not-here, in-and-out, me-and-not-me. I thought for a while that if I denied these 'others' strongly enough, then they really would go away and leave me alone, and back would come Competent, Capable Carolyn and all would be well with the world. Except it didn't quite happen like that. I'd had a breakdown for a reason, and there was no going back.

So I had to get to know them. Even 'the hated child, sitting across from me, mocking me.' To be honest, all of them were hated; it felt as if most of them were



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring



mocking me. There was the high-speed chatter of acerbic criticism; the intolerant disgust of silent pouting; the delirious scream of all-out rage; the silence of stuck-still terror. These were the voices of the 'others' – to a degree embodied in my imagination, but ever-present, like white noise, oppressive and unalone. I wanted it to stop. All day long: screaming. All day long: a wail of unmitigated suffering. All day long: the hotbreath snarl of the malicious critic, exposing yet another failure.

I knew that they were not 'real people' with three-dimensional bodies. I also knew that they were not just 'voices' or a clattering of meaningless, disconnected thoughts. I knew, without knowing the right name for it, that these were parts of me. But I also knew that to talk about them as real would invite the noose-label of 'schizophrenia' and that its inevitable medication would give no space for thought or processing or

reason. I had to hold my parts as 'feeling real' whilst accepting that they were not – that they were parts of me, not other people, and not psychotic intrusions either. And all the time, on the outside, look normal.

Therapy started the dialogue. It was curious at first to realise that this person sitting opposite me had just been conversing with me, but me-as-other-me. At first, I tried not to think about it. It felt too shameful. But over time, as I realised that she wasn't fazed by it, and that I wasn't being shamed for it, or punished, I began to allow the reality to sink in. It was undeniable. There I sat, with just void stretching behind me for the last twenty minutes, and she was telling me things that I-as-not-me had told her, that only I would know. She had clearly been talking to me, just not me-as-me. And it was startling to be told about these nuances of me-as-not-me: familiar characteristics, but stretched taut, like a rubber band.

Switch was clearly a part of me but an extreme version: vulnerable, prescient, outraged, hurting. He could communicate what I was feeling deep in my guts, in a way that I hadn't even begun to recognise for myself, let alone share with another. He carried memories that I did not, with a sharp, high definition reality to them, especially the emotions. He knew other



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring

parts of me. He was able to lean forwards into relationship in a way that I could not. So my first real introduction to this Switch part of me was as he was reflected back to me from my therapist's experience, and then my husband's. It took a long time to be able to hear it, and accept that this was me, albeit me-as-not-me, that they were referring to.

Then came internal dialogue. It seemed utterly stupid to begin with. How are you supposed to 'communicate inside'? At first I held back not so much out of ignorance for 'technique', and fear that nothing would happen, but more out of fear that it would. I still didn't want to accept that I had 'parts'. What if they did indeed talk back to me? Would that prove I was mad? I read others' accounts and it seemed like some people could hold an open dialogue, saying things to themselves and clearly hearing a reply. It didn't work like that for me. I had to hunt for the sense inside. I had to learn to finely adjust my antenna and seek out the signal.

The communication within was more in the rumble of shifting tectonic plates, more in the pain that streaked suddenly upwards, more in the wave of emotion that stung my eyes. Only gradually was I able to begin to put these sensations into words. It took a number of years before I could look inside, listen, and then say, 'I

think Switch is feeling ...' Communication is not easy. But it is essential.

Words have always been my thing, so I let words run riot to aid this internal dialogue. I would journal daily, sometimes several times daily, and let a rip-roaring splurge erupt from within me - writing anything, everything, asking questions, answering them, going with the flow, using imagery, writing out imaginary dialogue, seeking an impression from within. It didn't have to make sense. I was just showing myself that I was willing to search for myself, that I was willing to listen to myself, that I was willing to hear.

Sometimes I would use more than words - diagrams and headlines of elusive thoughts drawn together on A3 sheets of paper with interconnecting lines drawn in different colours: anything to get my usually-dormant right brain into action. The purpose wasn't the end product: the purpose was the communication. Sometimes I would 'lose time' as another part took over; other times I would be vaguely aware that I wasn't quite 'myself', that I felt distant and derealised, and that I was observing myself write.

Sometimes, when that happened, I didn't know what it was that I was writing, until I read it through again afterwards. It became a way of practising switching



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring

in and out of parts whilst remaining co-conscious – allowing myself to be the whole of me, and be conscious of being the whole of me, rather than squirrelling myself away into shameful obscurity.

And she sat across from me, the hated child, mocking me. Gradually I learned to just let her be, and not try to change her. Not try to blot her out, or punish her for existing, or shame her into submission, or silence her with threats. Maybe she could just be. I realised what an abuser I was – to myself. Everything that I hated about the people who had dealt atrocities to me, I was doing to myself. I would shout at myself, hiss at myself, punish myself, yell at myself, torture myself, demean myself, humiliate myself, shame myself, scold myself, hurt myself, hate myself. I would do everything to myself that had been done to me by others. And if I was honest, I wanted other people to treat me well. I wanted them to love me. I wanted them to be kind towards me and give me a break. But fundamentally, towards myself, I wanted to be an abuser.

Then these two words, whispered in therapy, proffered as an alternative viewpoint: *self-compassion*.

I heard them, and nothing registered. They made no sense. I had a tonne of compassion – for others. Very little for

fools (admittedly) but a lot for people who were hurting. And yet, strangely, I had none for myself. It hadn't even occurred to me that I could have it for myself. Compassion was what you had for other people – why would you have it for yourself? It felt selfish, and greedy, and indulgent, and glib. *Self-compassion*? Wouldn't that make me more bad? If I loosened the leash, if I gave myself a break, if I showed kindness and concern and empathy and love, wouldn't I be allowing the devil within me to take over and go berserk? I needed to be harsh towards myself: it was the only thing that held back my evil. I needed to criticise myself: who knows what mistakes I would make if I didn't punish myself cruelly for each tiny one. I needed to shout at myself: if I didn't, laziness would consume me and I would lay forever in an unwashed sprawl of slobbery on the sofa. When did compassion ever play a part? I survived what I survived because I had parents who loved me by beating me when I was bad, by punishing me when I was slack. They girdled my ego with criticism to keep it in check. That is how you're supposed to motivate, and restrain, and control, and direct. It worked for me ...

Except, of course, it didn't. I grew up with DID. I grew up wanting to kill myself. I grew up with a self-loathing so massive that daily I plotted my own self-destruction. But old habits die hard. When you've been



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring

abused as a form of 'discipline', to make you 'good', it's hard to break away from the brainwashing that tells you that it was for your own good, and that if they didn't hurt you then you would be even 'badder' than you already are.

Believing that I was fundamentally bad, I accepted my parents' harsh discipline of me as love, which is what they said it was. I accepted that if they hadn't censured me for dropping 1.25% on a French exam, the next time I would have failed completely. When I won a place at Cambridge University, my mother comforted me: 'You didn't get in because you're clever. You only got in because you worked hard.' Had she not punished me for the failed marks in French, I wouldn't have been so industrious, and then I wouldn't have been able to trick the system to gain a place at a University where I wasn't clever enough to be. I had a lot to be grateful to her for.

And I accepted her techniques. Every failure, every missed punctuation mark on an essay, every question that I didn't immediately know the answer to, I berated myself for being lazy and stupid. And it worked. I did well. Until it didn't work, and I had a breakdown. Until I could bear being abused no longer.

It was several years into therapy though before the irony struck me: the irony



that here I was, week after week, session after session, trying to put myself back together again, trying to heal from the abuse. I was trying to rebuild myself and integrate myself and establish a secure base within myself to go out and conquer the world, rather than accept defeat and commit suicide. I was trying to heal from abuse, and all the time I was still abusing myself. Still snarling at my struggles, still flipping out at a drink spill, still growling at my imperfections. Abuse, abuse, abuse. Back at me came this therapist, who wouldn't abuse me, wouldn't run me down, wouldn't growl at me or shout at me or shriek at me like a banshee, wouldn't accept that it was all my fault, wouldn't accept that I should have done something, wouldn't accept that I deserved it. I kept fighting her but eventually she began to win. They get you in the end, these therapists. They keep at you with their insistent, patient, pesky tenacity. They keep treating you with 'unconditional



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring

positive regard' and eventually you just have to throw your hands up and accept that you're never going to change their minds, because they're just too damn stubborn. An irresistible force meets an immovable object and *ker-bang!* suddenly it's *your* worldview that is changed.

What would it mean for me not to abuse myself? What would it mean for me to treat myself as I'm pleading for other people to treat me? What would it mean for me to draw a line in the sand, step over it, and say that I'm not going back? That the abuse is over, that I won't let anyone else abuse me now, not even me? What would that look like? What would it mean? At first, it just meant terror. It was all unthinkable. It was a trick. It must be. Abuse was the one constant in my life, a reassuring backdrop. Awful - yes. Unbearable - of course. And yet always there. I couldn't imagine life without it. What would my voices say all day long? What would some of them do? I couldn't imagine it. I didn't want it. Better the devil I knew ... Powerlessness told me that I couldn't change it, that I couldn't live in a new world, a free world, a world without abuse. I can't. I didn't know why; I just knew it was true - I can't. Then that collision again, where I had to admit that my feelings are just feelings, and are meant to be felt. And truth is truth and is meant to be believed. And sometimes,

just sometimes - 'never the twain shall meet'. So on the one side, I felt that I couldn't imagine life without abuse. I felt that I could never manage to show myself compassion, and draw near to these other parts of me. And then the skull-cracking realisation that I wasn't powerless - I was powerful. I was powerful enough to keep ruining my life by perpetuating the abuse. And I was powerful enough to develop new habits, too, and end it.

'It is what it is' became a bit of a mantra. But I couldn't just say it - too many years of Sensorimotor Psychotherapy taught me this - no, I had to say it with a shrug of the shoulders. Not any shrug of the shoulders either. That shrug of the shoulders. That particular shrug of the shoulders that I learned as a way of resourcing myself, the feeling that I 'installed' in my memory of being competent and capable and able to choose, that I was my own master and commander, that I was in charge of my life, and if I didn't want to go there, didn't want to do that, didn't want to take that abuse any more ... I just needed to do an upside-down smile and that shrug of the shoulders and say, 'It is what it is' and walk away. I could fail at something, mess something up, get something inside-out kind of wrong, and at the end of it I just needed to sigh, smile upside down, shrug and say, 'Oh well, it is what it is.' End of. No more beating myself up. Just a shrug of my



DEVELOPING COMPASSION FOR PARTS



by Carolyn Spring



shoulders and a keen, heartfelt attitude towards myself of self-compassion and 'It's ok.'

Slowly, my attitude towards some of these other parts of me began to change. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with Diddy for being little, and vulnerable, and for needing. Perhaps it's normal to need. Perhaps I don't have to get cross with her like my mother got cross with me, to keep her neediness in check. Perhaps if I just sit down next her to her, sidle up to her, put an arm around her ... perhaps then she might stop crying and she might be able to catch her breath and to be. The part of me that stiffens in shameful horror at spilling a drink: perhaps instead of the tirade inside that I feel at the stupidity, the clumsiness, the idiocy, the carelessness ... perhaps instead I could just smile, and

shrug my shoulders, say, 'It is what it is ...' and help to clean up. And perhaps then the other parts, the ones who flail me furiously that I'm not good enough, and I don't do enough, and I don't know enough, and I'm not working hard enough ... perhaps they'll learn from me and loosen up too. Perhaps we could all aim to work together a bit more. Isn't that what healing, and recovery, and integration is all about?

She sits across from me still, but she doesn't mock me as much. Slowly she's learning that I understand and that I care and that I won't hurt her. I won't hate her any more. At times I still get frustrated with her, and I don't get it right. But then it's her turn to roll her eyes, shrug her shoulders, and say, right back at me, with less than a growl but not quite yet a smile, 'It is what it is.' •

