

Support Sheet



an infinite mind®



International Society
for the Study of Trauma
and Dissociation

Supporting a Person Who Lives with Dissociative Identities

Finding out that your friend, family member or partner has a dissociative disorder may feel confusing or unsettling, or you may find this information helpful - perhaps it confirms many things you have already observed.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there are many myths about dissociative disorders, particularly Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). There is still considerable stigma surrounding these disorders.

If you are feeling confused or unsettled, it can help to understand that dissociation is a natural response to overwhelming experiences and sensations. Dissociation is a way our mind protects itself from complete overwhelm.

There is a small group of people who dissociate a lot, usually due to extreme distress and trauma. They can develop separate self-states or parts, which we are calling dissociative identities.

If you want to support someone who has dissociative identities, it can be helpful to educate yourself about dissociative disorders by reading accurate and well-balanced information. To start the process, there are ISSTD Fact Sheets [here](#).

It is also good to remember that the person who is living with dissociative identities can be a great source of information – after all they are talking about themselves! Each person with a dissociative disorder is unique, and they can help teach you which symptoms or issues apply to them.

Some Tips to Help You Support a Person with Dissociative Identities

Remember that your friend/family member - no matter how differentiated their self-states may be - is firstly a person living with the impacts of complex trauma.

It is important to respect the boundaries and privacy of the person with dissociative identities. Some survivors find great relief in sharing their dissociative identities with others or talking about their trauma histories when they are ready, while others do not want to share them.

Be led by the survivor. This will support their healing and foster safety and trust between you. In addition, by focusing too much on someone's dissociative identities or traumas, you may miss the totality of the person you are with.

Don't be afraid to ask your friend/family member if they need support from you, or what support they need.

This can be simple, like regularly asking them in each situation. However, it can also involve sitting down together and having a big, general talk about your relationship and how you can support and relate to each other.

Be sensitive to the needs and wishes of the person with dissociative identities. Notice the person's strengths and what they bring to your relationship, as well as what they need for support.

Healthy relationships have an element of give-and-take to them. Such relationships are not just about one person giving all the support to another person.

Be careful not to 'pathologize' your friend or family member.

This means being careful not to just focus on them as if they are 'sick' or 'disabled'. All people have strengths and weaknesses and people with severe dissociation also want their skills and gifts acknowledged.

Focus on the present, not the past.

At times, it can feel like the past intrudes into the present, but the best way to support a person living with dissociative identities is to stay in the present. The past is NOT actually happening now. Keep yourself grounded in the present. Focus on what is happening right now and what the person's needs are right now. If your friend or family member is currently in a safe space, they may need to be reminded of that.



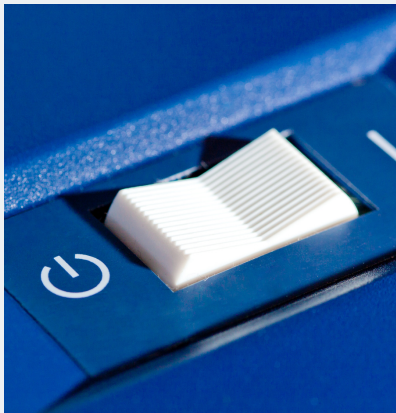
Help your friend/family member stay in their 'window of tolerance'.

'Window of tolerance' is a term used to describe the range of feelings that people can tolerate without dissociating. Research the term and learn more about it. When people go outside of their 'window of tolerance' they are likely to become overwhelmed and dissociation increases. People with dissociative identities may experience unhelpful or uncontrollable 'switches' between identities, or they may 'zone out' and feel like they are not there. Learning to stay 'in the window of tolerance' is a lifelong journey for everyone. People with dissociative identities may not always know if their 'window of tolerance' is exceeded. They are used to 'switching' or 'zoning out' to cope. Encourage your family member/friend to speak with their mental health professional about techniques and strategies that can help them to stay within their own window of tolerance.



Stay calm if a 'switch' occurs.

Often switches between identities are subtle, but sometimes they can be noticeable and may cause you to feel uncomfortable or disoriented. It can seem like, suddenly, another person is present. But this is not the case. Switching is a common way that people with dissociative identities cope with discomfort, deal with emotions or problems, or it may be a way to communicate. It helps to stay calm, and in the present moment. Continue to relate to the person in the present and to the mental state and issues they are presenting with.



Consider alternative ways to communicate.

Sometimes people with dissociative identities have trouble with communication. This is often due to amnesia (memory loss), or not being aware of communication between or from other parts. It can help to keep a 'communication book' to communicate. Write in this book to encourage open communication. Having a written record to look back on can also help when parts are unable to remember.

Having a safe relationship is the most important thing.

Most people with dissociation are caring and unlikely to harm other people. However, trauma and dissociation are not an excuse to harm anyone, nor is the stress of being a support person a reason to harm anyone. If anger, aggression, or violence are an issue between you and the person you support, it is important to urgently seek professional help.

Develop healthy boundaries.

People with dissociative identities (like all humans!) do best when they know where they stand with you. Severely traumatized and dissociative people may have parts of them which have unhealthy boundaries. This can be challenging for a support person, but having healthy boundaries (i.e. relationship rules) will protect both of you. Seek help from a therapist if you are having trouble recognizing when to say 'yes' or 'no', or what is okay, or not okay, for you.

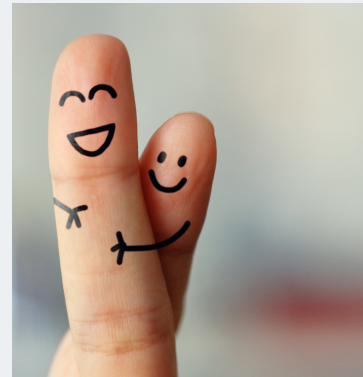
Respect all relationship boundaries.

Openness about relationship boundaries and mutual consent are an important part of all relationships. It is important that relationship boundaries are respected by both parties, including the various self-parts of dissociative people. These boundaries can relate to finances, sexuality, housekeeping, parenting and so much more! It may feel overwhelming to negotiate such boundaries with multiple dissociative identities. Seeing a relationship therapist who has experience with dissociative identities can be helpful.

Attend to safety planning, when necessary.

Many trauma survivors, including people with dissociative identities, struggle with personal safety at some point in their lifetime (e.g., unmanaged dissociation, self-injury, eating disorders, addictions or suicidal thoughts). People living with dissociative conditions may not recognize the "red flags" when they encounter unhealthy or abusive behavior from other people.

If you are a primary support person in the life of someone who struggles with safety, it is wise to openly discuss safety. They may turn to you for help, and it is healthy to have open conversations about what is helpful or harmful in times of distress – before they happen!



It is also important to discuss your limitations. People in crisis need the support of professional services and ideally there should be open discussion about how the survivor can access professional help. These conversations can be emotionally intense, or even triggering, so it is important to pace yourselves and seek professional help if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Partners and Parenting: Problems and Potential!

If your family or friend is also a parent, additional issues may occur. Many people with dissociative identities are able to be caring parents. However, having a parent who is traumatized and dissociative is also potentially stressful for a child. If your partner has dissociative identities, you are likely to experience extra parenting stresses, but this does not mean your family cannot be happy and healthy. It can be helpful to seek therapy support and parenting education for the whole family, including your child.

Look after yourself first!

You cannot support another person if you are exhausted or distressed. Practice regular self-care. It is okay to take 'time out' and rest. Consider getting professional help if you are struggling with boundaries and self-care.

Additional Resources

Please click on the logos to visit our websites for further resources and information.



*This Support Sheet is written for adults who are supporting a friend, family member or partner with dissociative identities. Additional information on supporting children and adolescents will be available soon.

*These tips are a beginning place for survivors with dissociative disorders and their friends or families. ISSTD strongly encourages that you explore these areas with a helping professional who understands dissociation so that you can best explore ways to help that will be specific and unique to each survivor.