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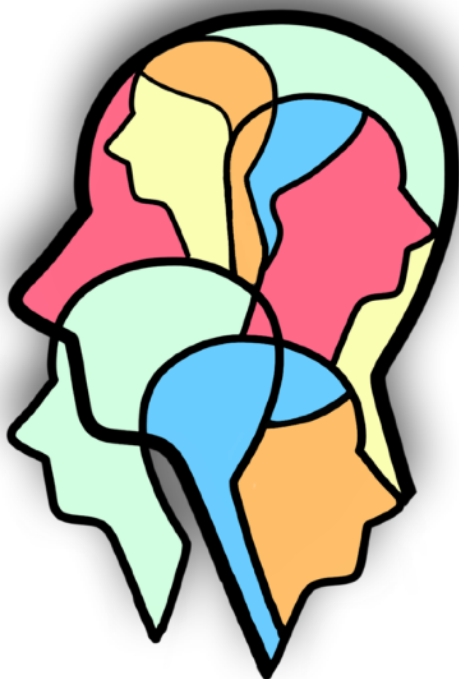
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A guide to understanding

Multiplicity

'The holistic experience involving two or more selves in the same body'



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Welcome

This guide contains information about multiplicity; **the holistic experience involving two or more selves in the same body.**

It gives those who know, support, or work with people with multiplicity information to help understanding and identify ways to support them. Whether you are a friend, parent, partner, teacher or anyone else, this guide is here to help you better support people who are multiple.

The guide has been developed from information provided to Dr Zarah Eve within her PhD thesis, where she spoke to people with lived and living experience of multiplicity, along with their support networks and professionals. The full thesis can be found at: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/634758/>

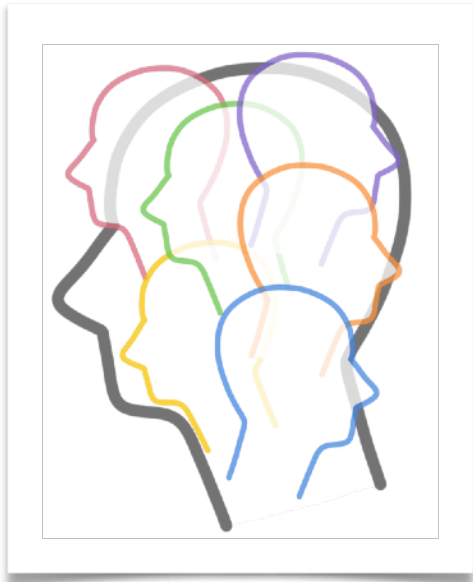
This guide could not have been developed without the information provided by the research participants within this study; we thank them greatly for their time and responses.



What is Multiplicity?

Multiplicity is the experience of having more than one self that lives in one body. Simply put, being multiple is **being more than one**.

We all have different parts of ourselves, and show these to different people. For example, we might act differently with a boss at work than with a friend. We also may have conflict internally e.g., a part of us is good at talking in front of others, while another part does not like socialising. For some young people the experience of having different parts or selves is a lot stronger.



Did you know?

Multiplicity is also known as plurality. These are both umbrella terms to describe the experience of sharing the body with other selves.

People with multiplicity share their body with different selves – these selves can have different ages, genders, memories, and stories. They may have different names and personalities. They might all make decisions together, or some selves might make the decisions for everyone.

Multiplicity describes an experience – it is not a diagnosis. There are many ways to experience multiplicity. Some people might find it comforting and helpful, while other people might find it frightening.

There are thought to be many reasons why people experience multiplicity. For some people, it is just the way they are. For others, it is something that is linked to their religion or spiritual world. And for others, it is related to difficult experiences in their lives. Sometimes when we have distressing experiences or experience trauma, we dissociate to cope (we switch out of the experience in order to escape it). Sometimes this develops into different selves as a way to cope with the world.

Currently there is not a lot of understanding about multiplicity, with people often having to talk about their experiences using medicalised language or clinical understanding which does not reflect their lives. This can mean people do not understand what multiplicity is or how to support people living with it.



Some of the terminology we use when talking about multiplicity

Selves/system

Also known as headmates or multiples, selves are the different identities that make up the body. Selves can have different genders, ages, preferences, behaviours, and memories.

A system is a combination of the selves who live in the body. The selves within a system are often aware of others sharing the body, but are not always.



Headspace

Headspace is the internal world that selves live in. Often viewed as a houseshare, people can share internal space or have walls up that separate selves from each other.

Fronting/co-fronting

When a headmate is in control of the body, they are fronting. Co-fronting involves two or more selves being in control of the body at the same time. People can also be co-conscious when they are aware of what is happening in the outside world, but they are not fronting or in control. Communication can happen with the person who is fronting.



Switching

Switching is the change of who is fronting. For some selves, it can be an unnoticeable change to the outside world. For others, it is a difficult and private experience that can be challenging for them. Often people do not want to share their switching experiences with the external world and may choose a private space for this to happen in.

Some systems have control over when they switch, they may have a schedule for when different people want to be in control of the body. Other people may switch without choosing too – this often happens in times of stress.



Difference between self-multiplicity, multiplicity and DID

Experiences related to multiplicity are thought to reside on a continuum from everyday experiences, through to multiplicity, and to clinical experiences including Dissociative Identity Disorder.

Self-multiplicity: people have different aspects of their personalities, identities and experiences. People are not thought to have a fixed identity, but their identities and personalities change based on the situation they are in. for example behaving differently in professional settings compared to social events.

Multiplicity: having different identities that live within one body – these identities are thought to be different selves rather than parts of one person’s identity.

Clinical experiences: having more than one self in one body is often considered to be linked to clinical experiences such as Dissociative Identity Disorder. People with DID often experience significant distress and impairment in functioning because of the presence of the identities. DID is often thought to develop as a coping mechanism in response to severe trauma. People with DID often have memory gaps and may not be aware of other selves sharing the body.

EVERY DAY
EXPERIENCES

MULTIPLICITY

DISSOCIATIVE
IDENTITY
DISORDER

Living as a multiple self

Memory

People with multiplicity can have differences and issues with their memory in a range of ways. For some systems there is shared memory space where all selves can remember everything that happens in the body. For others, selves may only remember what is happening when they are in control of the body. This might mean that people's daily lives can involve:

- Forgetting about appointments
- Forgetting about conversations with people
- Losing track of time
- Forgetting about visiting a place or doing something specific



If systems struggle with their memory, they might seek out help with it so they help improve their daily life.

How can I help?

It is important not to make the person with multiplicity feel guilty for not remembering certain things. The person is not doing it on purpose.

You can ask the system what you can do to help them: they might already have strategies or adjustments in place that help them with their memory.

Living as a multiple self

Specific headmates

Systems living as multiple have multiple individual selves that make up the self or the internal world. These selves can have different names, ages, behaviours, preferences, memories and personalities. As such it is important to understand each of the selves that live within the body.

For some systems there may be specific selves that choose to be in control of the body, for others all selves will take it in turns to be in control of the body.

As discussed in the 'switching' section, this can be a choice that the system makes, for example one self may choose to be in control of the body during specific activities or day of the week. For some systems times of stress might make the switching behaviour less controlled.

Specific headmates might act in different ways when they are in control of the body, so it may seem that the body is acting differently.



How can I help?

Systems stress the importance of trying to understand and have relationships with the different selves that make up the body. While you may often see one specific self (this may be a choice that the body makes, to identify which self is the most comfortable with the given activity), it is good to ask about the other selves that make up the body.

The selves that do not front often can feel ignored and forgotten about when people do not ask about them – it is good to try to have relationships with all selves that want external relationships.



Supporting multiplicity

Language use

Language choices is a very individual experience of people with multiplicity. There is generally a choice made to not use medicalised language (for example not using the words alter) as these are often related to diagnoses and people having distressing experiences. Instead people with multiplicity prefer to use non clinical language and used within this workbook.

It is important to ask systems what language they would like to use, and then use that going forward. For example the term multiplicity is used within this, but some systems prefer to use the word plurality instead.

People with multiplicity are often very understanding when people use terminology they would prefer to not hear, as long as people are making an effort to use language that is preferential.



Recognition of difference

While many people with multiplicity do not want to have a diagnosis, and may argue against clinical criteria, some people find there is utility in diagnoses. A diagnosis can be useful to explain what is happening for some people, to be able to access specific support, and have a level of understanding to the general public who may not have heard of multiplicity.

Overall, people with multiplicity want the external world and the general population to be accepting of different ways that multiplicity can present, including but not limited to clinical experiences.

It is important to understand that knowing one person with multiplicity means you know one person with multiplicity – you do not know everything about multiplicity or that every other multiple system will act in the same way.

Taking time to understand

People with multiplicity are individual selves within a system who can want or need different things – for example one self may want therapeutic support for specific experiences they have had, other selves may not need to want this. Individual selves may act in different ways (for example being more shy in social situations) than other selves – it is important to understand what different selves need.

Space to explore

It is important to give people the space to explore their multiplicity openly. This can mean as a friend, loved one, or professional depending on what the system asks for. For some people, this might be taking the time and space to develop communication with other selves internally, for others it might be sharing their switching experiences or other selves with you.



People's experiences with multiplicity are not static – they might change quite a lot over time. This might mean that some systems can develop their daily switching schedules and communication positively, for others it might mean that times of stress can make daily living difficult. Having space and time to explore the ongoing developing experiences is important for people to live well as multiple.

Not wanting to fix

When you become aware of people's experiences of multiplicity, it might feel that you want to help them in any way you can. Because it is something that is not well known to the general public (despite the not uncommon prevalence rates of people having multiplicity experiences), people often try to help people become like them. To the general public this might mean being "one person, one mind". However, people with multiplicity do not often view their experiences negatively. Instead, they view them positively – that they could not live without them.

It is important to help people (if they want) in the way they want to – this generally will not mean becoming one person (often referred to as integrating). It could mean allowing people to develop positive ways of living day to day or developing their communication.



Tailored support

Support can mean different things for different systems. Some systems would like to have therapeutic support in order to help them live well – this can mean supporting their day to day living, their relationships with other selves, or how they feel when they switch.

For other people, support could mean helping the general public understand what multiplicity is and how people live day to day. Normalisation of experiences can really help people to be open about their experiences and not have to hide parts of their lives.

For other selves support can mean getting to know other systems in order to build a community. Knowing other systems can help emerging systems, get support from others with lived experience, and hope for future development.



Supporting you

The system trusts you

It is important to understand that if someone is sharing their experiences of multiplicity with you, it means they trust you! People often do not share their experiences with other people as they are worried about sharing personal and sensitive experiences to the general public who might judge them or treat them differently.

Respect your limits

It is normal for support networks and professionals to experience strong emotions when someone shares their experiences of multiplicity. It is important that you look after yourself as well as the person with multiplicity. Take time to understand what multiplicity is, while also taking time for yourself, respecting your own limits.



Learn to identify and accept your own feelings. It might help to write them down. Find an outlet for your emotions, such as talking to a friend, relative or therapist. You might find that your emotions come out in different ways – be careful that your loved one does not think negative emotions are directed at them.

Try to keep communicating with the person who has shared their experiences – it has taken a lot for them to open up to you, so while you are developing your understanding, try to keep communicating your journey to them.

Getting support

If you're finding your experiences hard to manage, and would like some extra support, try approaching someone you trust – like a parent, teacher, friend or counsellor – to talk to. If you're unsure of who you could confide in, or what you could say, have a look at www.voicecollective.co.uk/coping/telling for some ideas.

If you are struggling, you can always reach out to other services also.

Voice Collective have supported hundreds of young people with multiplicity, voices, visions and other sensory experiences – they have heard all kinds of stories. They can help you explore what's going on, find ways of managing and work towards your goals – whatever they may be.



They are available via email, on info@voicecollective.co.uk and phone, on 020 7911 0822. You can also join the discussions taking place on our online forum, for under 25s, at <https://www.voicecollective.co.uk/discord-forum>

If you're in crisis, or worried about your safety, you can speak in confidence with Childline, on 0800 1111, who are available at any time of the day or night.



To discover more about related research, please go to <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/research/research-centres/hpac/usen-network>

Notes

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