

PLANNING

FOR DIFFICULT TIMES



Planning for Difficult Times

PLANNING ISSUES FOR PEOPLE WITH A COMPLEX DISSOCIATIVE DISORDER:

Planning ahead may be difficult and can be an enormous challenge for individuals with a dissociative disorder, especially when it involves the need for self-care and boundary setting. Such people, or at least some parts of them, generally avoid dealing with painful or

conflicted feelings and situations. As a consequence, they often avoid thinking about or planning ahead to help themselves better manage a potentially difficult time. In the following sections you will find some of the major reasons why planning is difficult when it involves conflicted dissociative parts of yourself. You may also have your own unique reasons that are not listed. or at least some parts of them, generally avoid dealing with painful or



General Feeling of Being Overwhelmed in the Present:

When people are already overwhelmed and depleted, thinking about the future can seem like a monumental task, much less planning for it. Thus, it is essential to do your best to care for yourself, manage your time, get sufficient rest, and use your relaxation skills.

INNER CHAOS AND CONFUSION:

Cognitive confusion and foginess, blankness, and inner chaos among parts can make it difficult to think through and plan. Often this is due to being overwhelmed in the present and/or conflicts among dissociative parts.

DIFFICULTIES SETTING PRIORITIES:

Some people find it hard to prioritize what is most important, and for people with a dissociative disorder this may involve inner conflicts among various parts about what is important (for instance, feeling safe is a priority that may conflict with being in a particular relationship, which is a different priority)

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INNER CONFLICTS WITHOUT SUFFICIENT CAPACITY FOR NEGOTIATION:

Various dissociative parts may have conflicting needs or desires about an upcoming time. These conflicts may make the time more difficult than it needs to be. People may not be aware of these parts, or they may ignore or belittle them. For example, while one part may enjoy a free weekend, another may find it a waste of time, and yet another may find it lonely and overwhelming. One may dread a holiday while another comments on how

ridiculous it is to dread just another day. It can take time to learn how to be more aware of inner conflicts among parts and how to negotiate satisfactory outcomes. You can begin by acknowledging the conflicts and taking them seriously, and trying to help those parts of yourself as best you can. Gradually, negotiation will become easier.



DIFFICULTIES WITH TIME, TIME MANAGEMENT, AND TIME LOSS:

Most people with a complex dissociative disorder have some difficulties with time (see chapter 10; Van der Hart & Steele, 1997). Some are forgetful and may not recall making an appointment, or they may engage in the same activity twice, not remembering they have already done it. Some may be so overwhelmed

or depressed that they sit and do nothing or sleep away the day, unable to focus either on the present or the future. Some people with DID report recurrent problems with double bookings of appointments made by different parts of themselves or cancellations of appointments by other parts.



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PROBLEMS WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING:

Executive functions are cognitive skills involved in our ability to organize thoughts and activities, prioritize tasks, manage time efficiently, and make decisions. These skills may be limited or lacking in some traumatized people because traumatic stress adversely affects the areas of the brain that are key to using these functions. These problems can be overcome to a large degree, and there are many readily available resources on the Web or in print for



copied with problems with executive skills, particularly in material that addresses attention-deficit disorders in adults.

DIFFICULT HOLIDAYS AND OTHER SPECIAL TIMES:

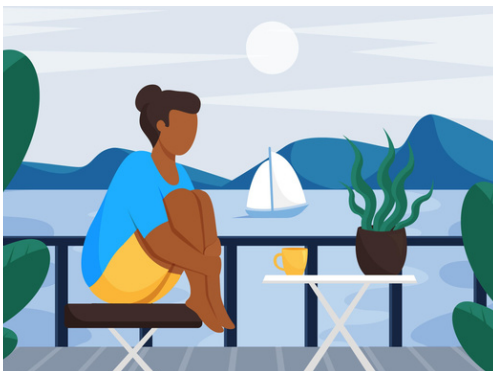
Specific times of day, time of year, seasons, holidays, weekends, and anniversary dates of significance may trigger painful feelings or traumatic memories (see chapters 14 and 15 on triggers). In addition, free days and times such as weekends, evenings, holidays, and vacations may be hard because they lack sufficient structure for people who do not yet know how to manage their free time.



During such days people may have more time to feel and think about painful issues or memories, which they might prefer to avoid. And if they are avoiding dealing with inner parts, these times are fertile ground for such parts to emerge unbidden. Therefore, empathic internal communication and collaborative planning are invaluable to prepare for these times.

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MANAGING HOLIDAYS:



Holidays are painful for many people, not just those who have a dissociative disorder. Some degree of depression, anxiety, loneliness, hurt, and general stress are fairly common for people in general. Everyone knows about the “holiday blues,” and at some level most of us realize that expectations of ideal holidays rarely match reality. Yet even when people may realize their expectations are unrealistic, they still may be affected emotionally. And there are added complexities for people who must make difficult decisions to be with family who might have been abusive in the past or continue to be abusive in the present; further more, some people are faced with the prospect of being alone at an important time. Finally, there may be pressure from those around you, or parts within you, to act like everything is fine, when you feel anything but fine. Such demands compound feelings of loneliness and being misunderstood, and even of shame or despair. Many people with a dissociative disorder did not have positive experiences of holidays in childhood, and these memories may be triggered, resulting in anxiety, depression, inner conflict and chaos, and flashbacks. Inner reflection, including communication with dissociative parts of yourself, may help you identify triggers and help you make plans to cope with them. You might decide to consciously avoid the trigger for the time being or help parts of yourself cope differently. For example, you might decide to use different holiday decorations, if the usual ones remind you of painful times. , for example, the holiday is the same, but what happens during the holiday now is quite different from then, and you are an adult now. The problem is not the holiday (the trigger) itself, but what it represents for you. You might plan to find ways to contain painful memories so you can enjoy the present holiday, and then deal with these memories at a later time, for instance, storing them in an imagined vault, or box, or on a computer file. It is often helpful to plan how you want to spend a holiday instead of waiting to find out what friends and family will do and whether they will invite you to join them. Learn to be proactive and deal with it before it happens!

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TIMES OF DAY, ANNIVERSARIES, AND SEASONS:

Many people with a dissociative disorder struggle during other kinds of situations that are reminders of painful events in the past. Perhaps nights are hard because when they were hurt by someone or when they feel the most lonely. Sometimes the date of an overwhelming experience brings back all the pain. For others, a season may be difficult, for example,



summer brings up painful reminders of events that occurred during that time of the year or, conversely, may evoke a sad yearning for wonderful summers spent with loving grandparents when life at home was hard.

OTHER DIFFICULT TIMES:

There are many times in daily life that may be especially stressful, such as a big meeting at work, an ongoing conflict with someone, a visit to the doctor, a medical or dental procedure, a separation or divorce, being alone when you need the support of others, or having to meet with family members whom you find difficult or even unsafe, and many others. Some of these situations may be challenging in their own right, while others are



difficult because they trigger you or some parts of you. We have addressed many of these issues in other chapters, for example, dealing with doctors in self-care, coping with triggers in, and regulating overwhelming emotions

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COPING WITH BEING ALONE DURING DIFFICULT TIMES:

There may be important times when you wish to be with others but instead find yourself alone. This happens from time to time for almost all people. Perhaps it is a weekend or holiday, your birthday, or a difficult anniversary for you. The loneliness that is evoked can be profound and painful. Make efforts to plan for these times. Even though you are alone, you do not have to feel lonely.



Use your relaxation kit and plan healthy activities to occupy yourself. Make a list of activities that you or some parts of you would like to do with and without other people. Try choosing a couple of activities that are agreeable to your whole self. If you cannot be with someone during your difficult time, plan to get together with someone a little later. You can always celebrate holidays or birthdays on a different day if you are flexible. After all, it is the enjoyment of the day, not the date itself that is important. If you are alone during a holiday or other important time, volunteer somewhere or make other active plans instead of sitting at home doing nothing and feeling lonely. You will find more help in dealing with being alone and lonely in chapter 30. Regardless of the type of situation, if you think you might have a hard time, the planning process is similar, with certain predictable steps, which we discuss next.

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HOW TO PLAN FOR A DIFFICULT TIME:

If you know of an upcoming time that will likely be difficult for you in some way, begin early with inner reflection and communication among parts of yourself. Reflect on what happens for you during those times, noticing what you feel and think, how your body responds to the stress and how various parts of you react. The awareness you gain from reflection allows you to make different choices instead of feeling hopelessly captive in your experience. You might be able to provide yourself with comfort, meaningful contact with others, and inner support for parts of yourself.



You may dialogue with parts of yourself, write in a journal or on the computer, or imagine an inner meeting. If you find these tasks difficult, ask your therapist to help you. Do not wait until the day before to communicate internally about upcoming difficult times. Give yourself sufficient space to think it through, to reflect, and to make a plan that will help you, so you can “deal with it before it happens.”

Even if you do not have “direct” communication with parts, you may already be aware of certain activities, people, foods, and so forth that might trigger you, as well as some ways to help yourself be more comfortable and safe. In the next section you will find some questions that will help you reflect on how you, including all parts of you, can best plan for difficult times. Find a quiet time at home to reflect on these questions. Try to take into account thoughts and ideas from as many parts as possible, because various parts of you may perceive the situation differently from each other. Until the day before to communicate internally about upcoming difficult times. Give yourself sufficient space to think it through, to reflect, and to make a plan that will help you, so you can “deal with it before it happens.”

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REFLECTIONS TO HELP WITH PLANNING FOR DIFFICULT TIMES:

- What times tend to be your most difficult?

- When you have a difficult time, what happens? For example, what do you feel and think, how does your body react?

- How do you usually make a plan? For instance, do you think it through, avoid it, prefer to be completely spontaneous, talk about it with others?

- What has helped you in the past with difficult times?

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REFLECTIONS TO HELP WITH PLANNING FOR DIFFICULT TIMES:

- What techniques and skills do you already use to help yourself with planning? You may also check on the Internet, look for books on planning (and executive functioning), or ask for help from your therapist or other supportive people.

- List any triggers for which you know you need to prepare

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- What are the fears and concerns of various parts of yourself about a particular time?

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REFLECTIONS TO HELP WITH PLANNING FOR DIFFICULT TIMES:

- How might you ensure your emotional and physical safety during this time?

- What obligations might you have to others during this time?

- Do these obligations conflict with your own self-care?

- Are there relational limits or boundaries that you need to set?

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REFLECTIONS TO HELP WITH PLANNING FOR DIFFICULT TIMES:

- If so, what would help you set them?

- Are particular parts of yourself especially vulnerable during this time? If so, what do they need to feel safe, supported, and cared about by you?

- Notice whether you prefer activities with other people during difficult times or if being alone is more helpful.

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Tips for Effective Planning:

- Put your plan in perspective. The need to plan is usually not an emergency, so you do not have to do it urgently. Give yourself time to think and to check in with yourself.
- Try to let go of the belief that there is only one single “right” solution or choice. There are almost always many “right” pathways, and if you make a mistake, you can deal with it. Many plans involve a combination of pros and cons, so often there is not a “perfect” solution, but rather one which likely requires some compromises.
- Most importantly, include all parts of yourself in your planning. Attend to their concerns, needs, and desires without judgment.
- Listen to both your head and your heart, that is, reflect. Sometimes your logic and your emotions (or “gut”) tell you something entirely different. Various dissociative parts typically base a choice either on too much feeling or on avoidance of feelings and needs, and they often do not know enough about the present. If all parts of you can work together to learn more about the present, acknowledge feelings, needs, and wants, and offer inner empathy and support, making plans can be a lot easier and clearer.
- Think before you act. Take your time, even if you feel “urgent.” Imagine being in your safe space or use a relaxation exercise to get yourself in an alert, calm space. Let all parts of yourself know they will be acknowledged and considered as you make your plans.

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- Imagine how your plan will affect you and parts of yourself. You are learning how to take care of yourself, which means you need to take yourself into consideration, as well as others. This is not selfish, but rather good self-care. After you anticipate how the plan will affect you and other parts of yourself, then you can take others into consideration.
- Ask trusted others for feedback, but make your own plans, taking their advice into consideration.
- Be willing to modify your plans if they are not working. Making small changes along the way often helps you accomplish your final plan better than rigidly sticking to a plan.

When Obligations to Others Conflict With Your Needs:

You may find yourself in conflict during a difficult time between your own needs and those of others. For example, you may have an obligation to attend a family function that you know will be very stressful for you. You prefer not to go, but you must. This may provoke intense inner conflicts among parts inside. Next you will find some suggestions for dealing with these conflicts in such a way that you are able to take care of yourself. You must learn to set healthy boundaries and negotiate compromises that work for you and all parts of you.



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- Negotiate to limit visits with others who are difficult, for example, visit for an hour instead of an entire evening, or a day instead of a weekend. Announce your time limit in advance or at the beginning of the visit. If needed, set the alarm on your watch or phone for the right time so you will not forget, or have a trusted person call you at that time.

- Stay in a hotel rather than in the home of a person with whom you have a difficult time.

- Invite a friend to be with you for support.

- Make plans to leave early if needed.

- Have your own transportation so you do not have to rely on someone else.

- Use imaginary rehearsal, protective suits, and inner safe places.

- Make quiet times for yourself during difficult visits by taking walks, going to your room to read or rest, or going to a movie or other activity.

- Make time for inner reflection and check-ins with all parts of you. Treat their needs seriously and with compassion.