



Multiplicity: Why not think of your “I” as a “We”?

By Mary Disharoon, MA, LMFT

The word *multiplicity* means “the state of having many parts or aspects”. Recognizing that you have many different parts or aspects that make up the wholeness of who you are indicates that you are complex and that you’re able to accept that fact.

You might have grown up hearing about someone in the news or a character in a book or a movie who had “multiple personalities” and you learned to associate it with being crazy. You chose to think of yourself as one coherent self, with one inner identity, operating in one body because that was your idea of psychological health and normalcy.

But, in reality, healthy people have many different inner parts that make up their “I”. When you can get to know the many different aspects of your own personality, you’ll be more able to be proud of yourself when you meet your own standards and you’ll be more able to forgive yourself when you don’t. You’ll even be more able to question your own standards and be flexible, if that is what you wish.

And with others, you’ll have an easier time too. Especially when they don’t act consistently with who you thought they were. As you accept them as authentic, no matter what parts of themselves they are exposing to you, you will be less confused and more able to effectively respond to what it is they are saying or doing.

A good example of this is when you go through a relationship break-up. The person you knew to be kind and loving towards you seems to change into someone else. This someone else can be cold and selfish, and you begin to question whether the time you had spent together was ever “real”. When you recognize that we all have a multiplicity to our personalities, then you can appreciate what you and your ex once had together, and also recognize that another aspect of him or her is now coming out. This allows you to treasure the good from the past and also accept when it’s over and time to move on.

Another example is when you are parenting, and you recognize your child is in a pleasing part, seeking your approval and connection. And at other times, you see a rebellious part coming out in her, as your child disagrees with you and claims her independence, even if it means she gets in trouble. Both are authentic parts of your child, and both are necessary resources for the child to develop so she can be an independent individual (rebel) and a person able to be accommodating in a relationship (pleaser).

Making a decision can be confusing and overwhelming. It will get easier when you can separate your own opposing opinions and think of them as distinct inner selves. You might

have a brave part of you that wants a particular outcome, but a fearful side of yourself is holding you back. Concern about what others might think of you could be a third inner self that would like to weigh in on the discussion.

On a more personal note, let's look at weight loss. You might have a health-oriented part that really wants you to lose weight and is ready to help you change. You might have an inner critic part that criticizes you and undermines your progress. You might have an exhausted part that prevents you from exercising. You might have an impulsive part that gets you to eat without thinking or a comfort eater that chooses ice cream to change your mood whenever you feel down. And you might have a doubting part that fills you with hopelessness whenever you try to make changes for your health. The diversity of this group of inner parts can make weight loss challenging.

But if you can open to thinking of yourself as having different inner selves, each with its own beliefs, attitudes, emotions, urges and body sensations, you will be freer to experience them without being controlled by them. And once you can think of them as separate inner selves, you can develop your ability to be their leader by taking charge of them and managing them.

Voice Dialogue is a therapeutic method developed by Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone that can help you know and experience the energy of your many different inner selves so you can manage them with the leadership of an Aware Ego process.

Once you develop an Aware Ego process, you will be able to choose which inner self you want to favor, without abandoning the other parts of yourself. This does not necessarily mean pleasing both sides, but finding a way to connect with and consciously carry the disappointment of the side that doesn't get its way with you. On some occasions, you might even blend the energy of two different selves to create a response for yourself that feels like an inner compromise.

By embracing your inner diversity and holding your many selves with an Aware Ego process, you will be able to appreciate and accept yourself in the fullness of your own being. You will also be better able to accept others in their fullness too. And all of this change will be easier to accomplish when you think of your "I" as a "We".