

The Split Self

★ *Do you . . .*

1. Do things and not remember how they happened (e.g., find yourself at a bar, not aware of how you got there)? Yes / No / Not sure
2. "Flip" into different emotional states (e.g., your moods shift very quickly and intensely)? Yes / No / Not sure
3. Have different sides of yourself that feel like separate people (such as "the young one," the "big one," "the weak one," "the angry one")? Yes / No / Not sure
4. Feel opposite extremes in relationships (e.g., feel totally positive toward someone at one time and then totally negative at another time)? Yes / No / Not sure
5. Frequently have mixed feelings about important decisions in your life (such as whether to stay in treatment, whether to get a job, etc.)? Yes / No / Not sure

What Is "the Split Self"?

"The split self" refers to different sides of the self that can occur in both PTSD and substance abuse. Becoming aware of these different sides can help you recover.

Substance abuse examples. One part of you wants to use substances while another part doesn't. This is sometimes called "Jekyll and Hyde."

PTSD examples. Parts of you might feel like "a little child" who needs protection; a "fighter" who bullies; a "teenager" who wants to have fun without worrying about tomorrow; and a "healthy one" who wants to work hard on recovery.

Splitting Happens for a Very Good Reason

Splitting is a psychological defense in which your internal world has different states of consciousness that emerge at different times. Just as a country needs an army for defense, so too the mind needs defenses when it is being attacked by devastating life experiences. Remember, these are normal and typical in PTSD and substance abuse; they were necessary for your survival. They do *not* mean that you are crazy. Also, many "normal" people have splits to some degree; the issue is how much they have them, and how dangerous they are.

If you have splits, it means that you had a psychological need earlier in your life to reject some part of yourself. For example, if you drove drunk and caused a terrible car accident, you may have felt extremely guilty but could not face those feelings at the time. The guilt may keep "popping up" in various ways in your life (as in bad dreams or flashbacks). Splits can also arise in childhood if your family rejected important parts of you. If it was not safe for you to express anger, for example, the anger may have become split off. But the split-off side doesn't go away—it stays hidden and emerges at times that may surprise you. You may notice that you feel ashamed about whatever side of yourself has been split off.

With PTSD and substance abuse, the sides that get rejected are typically those that want to use substances (you may feel "bad" for having cravings), that get angry (you feel you should always be "nice"), or that feel vulnerable (you feel you should always be "strong").

None of this is your fault—it all happens unconsciously, without awareness. (If you were aware of it, it wouldn't be split!)

(cont.)

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Splitting Leads to Unsafe Behavior

You are not in control of your rejected sides, because they are hidden. When you don't have control over them, they can control you by emerging at times when you don't expect them, or by "blotting out" healthier sides. This can be unsafe.

Exploring the Different Sides of Yourself

★ *If you want, answer the questions below. Use the back of this page if you need more space.*

1. Do you notice any sides to yourself?

Substance abuse: _____

PTSD: _____

Other: _____

2. Which sides do you like? _____ Which sides do you dislike? _____

3. Do you notice any dangerous behaviors from your splits? _____

THE GOAL OF INTEGRATION

Integration Is the Way to Overcome the Split Self

The way out of splitting is to *integrate* and *accept* the sides of yourself that have been rejected. What would it be like? If you felt angry, you would respect that the anger is there for a good reason. Rather than stifling it, you would seek to "hear" it and to express it in a safe way. The goal is to have access to all parts of yourself whenever you choose to. However, know that this may be difficult after a lifetime of rejecting those sides, or if they remind you of someone you hated (e.g., an abuser).

How Can You Work with the Different Sides?

☞ **Acknowledge, respect, and "own" these different sides, even if you don't like them.** It may feel as though you just want to get rid of some part of you. This doesn't work, as it is there for a good reason. A deeply caring attitude toward every part of you is what helps your recovery.

☞ **Try to remind yourself of the other sides if one side takes over.** If a side emerges that wants to drink, remind yourself that another side of you doesn't want to. If a side of you doesn't want to come to treatment, remind yourself of the side that does.

☞ **Do not punish yourself if you do something wrong.** Blame, guilt, shame, and "beating yourself up" increase the likelihood of maintaining splits. Why? Because they represent a lack of acceptance. If you do something you don't like, try to understand it calmly and respectfully.

☞ **Create healthy dialogue among the different sides.** Some people find success in "calling a conference" among the different sides of the self, so that all sides can be heard. Or one side can try to soothe another side. Allowing the sides to "talk" to one another may sound bizarre, but in fact can be very healing. Try rehearsing, out loud or on paper, what a healthy dialogue among sides of yourself might sound like.