

By Laura Bemis

My House My Jewelry

There have been many epoch moments in my life that have been filled with depression, anger, and thoughts of leaving this conventional world. But, while I am alive, I am a survivor and fight for my mental health and wellbeing.

One day I spoke about a trauma in my life only to be told that it was too *politically charging*. This really affected me emotionally since the story was a struggle I had gone through and ended with the progress I had made since the late 1980s. This is significant, because I have been diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder (previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder).

To help you understand, Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a severe condition in which two or more distinct identities, or personality states, are present in—and alternately take control of—an individual. Some people describe this as an experience of possession. The person also experiences memory loss that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness. DID is a disorder characterized by identity fragmentation, rather than a development of separate personalities. More than 70% of people with DID have attempted suicide, and self-injurious behavior is common among this population. Among those with DID in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, approximately 90% report experiencing childhood abuse. *

The best way I can explain my thought process is for you to think of your head as a house containing many rooms. Some rooms are connected to each other and some are not. Each room is different. Some rooms have similarities, but no two rooms are identical. I used to think that others controlled me until I realized that, because some of the rooms are not connected, I don't always know what is happening in other rooms when I am in one room.

In my house I have a room that is full of childhood toys. Another room is dedicated more to the socializing of adults having fun at gatherings, such as parties. Yet another room is full of weapons (I try not to enter that room and to keep it locked). Some of the rooms in my house are messy and cluttered, while others are very organized. I have a room that is full of camera equipment and work gear. In another of these rooms, I store my traumas, or what I will call my jewelry. I wrote this analogy from the thoughts that raced through my head after I had shared a trauma with people I thought would understand, but it was not well received. Because the jewelry represents trauma, this analogy may be hard to follow, but give it a try.

What is the use of jewelry if you don't wear it? If your jewelry is locked in a box and only you have the key to see it, is the jewelry really there? We should show our jewelry and be proud to wear it, for each piece of jewelry has a story. The jewelry is not the main focus, but accents what we are wearing or **who we are**.

My jewelry is not always polished, clean, or tidy. Some pieces are even broken, but I still wear them. Many pieces are well worn and some may even seem out dated, but each piece has its purpose and I don't lock them in a box.

Unfortunately, some people don't like the jewelry I wear, and instead of realizing it is my jewelry to display, they forbid me from wearing it in their establishment. I have to take off that piece of jewelry or swap it for another piece, before I can enter. Two steps forward and one step back; the judgment and stigma is there.

In a sense, those people are trying to lock **me** in a box. I am no longer free to express myself through my choice of jewelry, but am forced to only wear what is politically accepted. So, instead of being locked in a box, I have a new piece of jewelry to wear—one that no longer accents what I wear, but clashes with my clothing.

After writing this analogy, my mind came back to reality, or entered another room. I remembered that I have come a long way in the past 30 years from when I received my first piece of “jewelry.” I am a professional photographer who teaches photography to adults. I can walk into the room that has the camera gear and discuss photography with ease. I don't get lost or frustrated in this room, since it is a happy place.

I am an advocate for mental health and have served on the local mental health board. I have been a Rotarian, lived through a very bad bout of anorexia nervosa, and am now a speaker. When I work with professionals, I walk into a room that allows me to think professionally, versus the room with the toys.

I give presentations through a couple organizations that try to beat the stigma around mental illness, so that people can wear their “jewelry” without shame. Sometimes, like now, I get stuck in the room with the jewelry and have a hard time finding the door through all the clutter.

Other parts of me speak to law enforcement on what helps de-escalate a mental health crisis. Before I found the house in my head, I designed my own major and graduated with a Bachelor's degree. I am able to work part-time and have made some close friends. Being with friends and working happens when I step out of the house and into the yard.

I go to doctors regularly and take medications to keep me healthy. And, although I still struggle daily with depression, hearing voices, insomnia, PTSD, and other emotional problems, I am a survivor and a fighter. And that I can be proud of.

* Definition comes from *Psychology Today* article.