

'I don't know what came over me!'

Most of us have had the experience of being 'taken over' by a part of ourselves which we didn't know was there. We say 'I don't know what got into me.' We feel a sudden rush of surprise or even shame at our atypical mood and behaviour. This can be either a positive or negative experience. It may have helped us cope or got us into trouble!

We're talking about **sub-personalities** here, normally dissociated parts of the self which pop up in special circumstances

The way in which we usually recognise this unfamiliar aspect of ourself is that we find ourselves in a particular situation, acting in ways unfamiliar - and which we may not like - yet are unable to change by an act of will or conscious attention. This lasts as long as the situation persists, perhaps a few minutes, perhaps an hour or more. It then changes by itself when we go into a different situation.

The question of whether there are parts of a person which can be talked to and worked with as if there were separate mini-personalities has fascinated thinkers and writers for centuries. Some of our greatest literature describes **sub-personalities, Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde being the best-known example**. Aspects of sub-personalities can also be heard in Shakespeare's soliloquies where different 'parts' of the character talk out loud on stage to express what is going on in their minds. Often these parts convey a different character to the one speaking out loud and interacting with others.

A definition of sub-personalities by the authority John Rowan (1990) is: *'a semi-permanent and autonomous region of the personality, capable of acting as a person.'*

Why are sub-personalities becoming of more importance and interest in these times?

My theory is that we have had to create compartments & categories within so that we can sort the information, thoughts and feelings that arise as we live out our days in the Information Age. We are subjected to more and more stimuli and choices. Filtering and selecting what to attend to has become a critical activity.

Being human, we can only accomplish this using the structures and mechanisms we have created in earlier 'sorting' experiences together with their filters and preferences. Occasionally, after some practice, we can add new filters to help us sort new experiences. But always, when we are uncertain and anxious we are likely to respond to earlier, tried and tested patterns.

The first level at which this sorting is initiated is, strangely enough, at the level of personality: in essence, answering the question 'Is this for me or not?' and if, 'Yes', which part of me does this information refer to? If 'No' can I afford to ignore it completely, or must I deal with it in some way

for example by saying, 'No thanks, I don't want any' as you might to a caller at your door.

There are a number of simple variations on 'is this for me?' – like 'is this acceptable/OK to me?' or 'is this of value to me?'

You can recognise an everyday example of this kind of sorting when you go through your post. There you will employ filters to screen out which letters to open and which to disregard. Evidence that this is being done at the level of personality lies in the feelings you will experience as you go through this process: how do you feel about the unsolicited mail you receive? How do you know if something is personal or commercial? How do you feel when you notice a letter from someone you recognise?

I suggest that there will be at least three 'perceptive filters' on the look out as you sort through the mail. One will be a Rejector and will quickly trash anything that looks dismissable, the next will be an Acceptor, who might even be enthusiastic and excited when 'it' spots some mail it likes the look of (that's why so many direct mailshots try to look personal). The third is Undecided, who will give instructions to pause and get more information if in doubt. (that's the part that direct mail attempts to overrule when it says: 'important information inside')

It is likely that each 'sorter' will have a slightly different mood and tone of voice, varying from positive to negative. Oddly enough, you can have different days when the power of these three changes – one day you will be tempted to open too many while another you may throw away too much. On yet a third day you might spend too much time prevaricating about whether bits of mail are familiar or not. These changes in emphasis could be brought about by the presence of other motivations or simple mood swings.

Sound familiar? These are practical examples of sub-personalities at work.

How can you know your sub-personalities and how can you spot them? Here is a technique for going in search of them:

1. Recall the last time when you suddenly felt taken over by a mood or state of mind that took charge and dictated a course of action. Suddenly, all your decisions were automatic, some kind of formula based on past experience was in charge and your actions and words were on the 'tip of your tongue' without having to think about it.
2. Next recount the details of that encounter, the settings, your motives, the nature of the others involved, the details of the interaction. At what point did your automatic self take over? What happened in the seconds preceding that take-over (either inside or outside of you). Take a moment to mimic the posture, gestures and tone of voice of this part of you – and h/her favourite phrases. What is his view on life? If you asked him what h/she was there to save you from/help you with, what would h/she say?

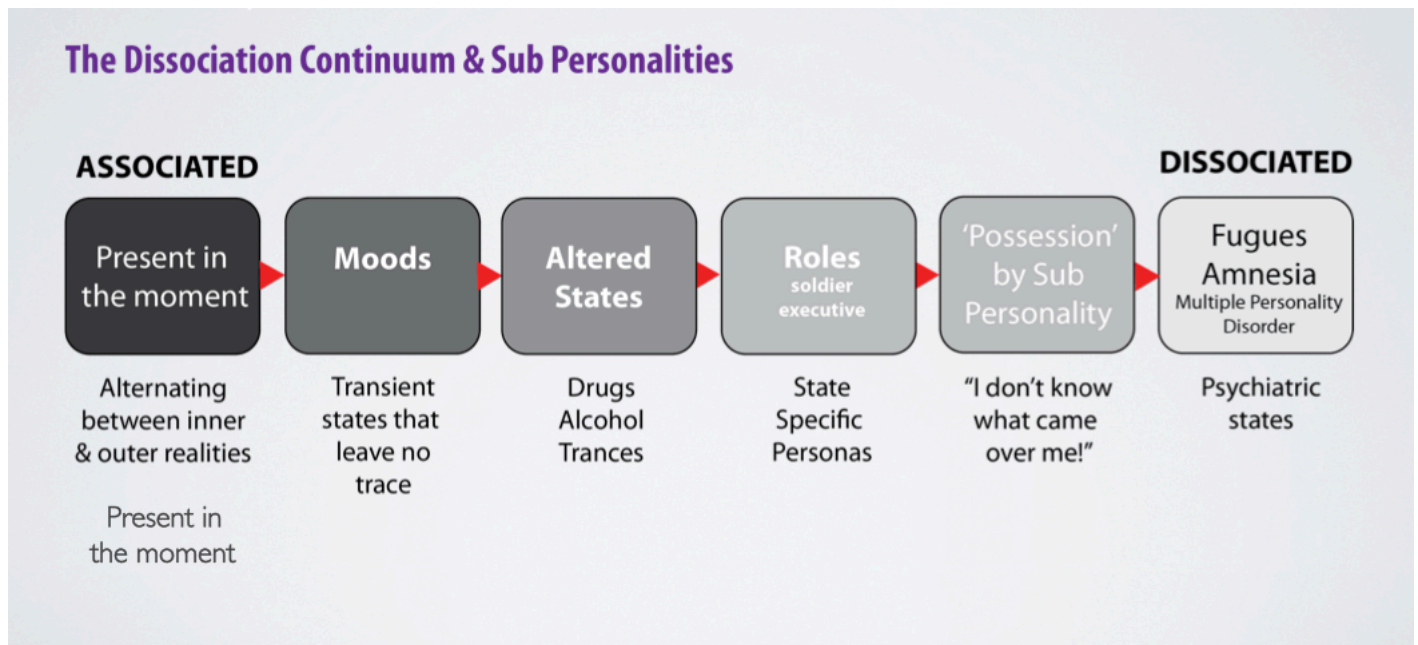
3. Then, take a few seconds to give this character a name, with or without a strap line. (Strap lines often help here to give a little more character to the sub. For example one of mine is Awkward B**t**d and his strap line is “I want to speak to your manager!”)

4. Now, consider this: if this person was in charge all the time, what would life be like? How would it be different?

You will probably notice from your answers that this sub-personality is quite different from your normal self. But why is it so difficult to overrule or edit our sub-personalities' character, when they are in charge? In other words that it is quite unlike your normal self!

I believe the reason is that they are highly dissociated from our everyday, present-in-the-moment self. We are completely unaware of them until they are triggered by circumstances. In psychological language that means they enjoy a high degree of dissociation from our normal self because when they do take over, it is like a mild form of possession. To put this into a usable 'model' we need to recognise that there is a continuum of dissociation varying from left to right in the degree to which we are 'taken over' by moods, trances, drugs, roles and subs.

Here is a picture of the continuum of dissociation, and where I think sub-personalities fit along it:



As you can see, sub-personalities are quite far away (dissociated) from being present in the moment. This explains why it often feels we have been taken over by an alien force when a sub is in charge.

In case you find all this far-fetched or of questionable relevance, let me remind you that you have been trained to develop subs. Here is a snapshot from one of the world's best selling childrens' titles:



There is, I believe, a complex relationship between our subs and the brands that we buy and I want to explore that next – but before we do that – so you can have a more complete picture and some clear examples, I want you to read the next post on archetypes because these character types capture some of the traits and ideals of our subs, including the nasty parts!

If you'd like a pdf of this post, get it here: