



ISSTD Comments on “The United States of Tara”

Premier professional society on dissociative disorders issues statement about Showtime’s “The United States of Tara”

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WASHINGTON, Monday, January 19, 2009 — Recent articles in the New York Times and The New Yorker have praised Showtime’s newest sitcom “The United States of Tara,” a series about a woman with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) that aired Sunday. The reviews of the show hint at a potential new hit for Showtime which, if accurate, may propel DID into the forefront of public consciousness.

Known best by its previous name Multiple Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder is present in about one percent of the general population and in as many as 2-3 percent of psychotherapy patients. DID is a psychiatric diagnosis, but it is different from many other diagnoses in that it is a coping strategy for adverse experiences in childhood.

In an effort to cope with overwhelming childhood trauma (usually abuse), some children spontaneously develop different parts of the self. The child’s repeated psychological efforts to ‘push away’ painful events can cause parts of the self to become separate from one another. These parts ‘hold’ the memories and experiences of what happened, so that the child does not have to remember. When this happens, the parts tend to develop their own identities (i.e., senses of self). Thus, DID is a survival strategy for coping with repeated childhood trauma.

Exactly how the child achieves the development of separate parts is not well understood. Two points, however, are clear. First, despite having alters, a person with DID does not have more than one person ‘inside.’ The alters are ultimately part of a single self, and therapeutic healing can unify that divided self. Second, not all children possess the

‘ability’ to develop DID. Even in the face of repeated childhood trauma, only some children will develop alters.

It is important to note that not all individuals who develop DID are the same. The behavior of Tara is not the most typical clinical presentation of DID. Only a small percentage of persons with DID (around 5%) display such dramatic changes in behavior as does Tara. The vast majority of people with DID hide their symptoms from others and rarely appear overtly symptomatic.

In anticipation of questions raised by “Tara,” ISSTD has recently posted new information on its website that answers, in layman’s terms, frequently asked questions about Dissociative Identity Disorder. In addition, each week ISSTD will post a professional commentary on that week’s episode of “The United States of Tara.” For additional information about dissociation and DID, including information about the treatment of adults and children with dissociative disorders, please visit the website of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation.

About the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD):

ISSTD is a nonprofit professional association organized for the purposes of: information sharing and international networking of clinicians and researchers; providing professional and public education; promoting research and theory about dissociation; and promoting research and training in the identification, treatment, and prevention of dissociative disorders. For more information, please visit www.isst-d.org.