

# New Landscape: Support group in New York City

By Vivian

As I got better from DID/MPD and lost the magic structure that had sustained me for most of my 60 years, I felt like an immigrant in a foreign country, where I didn't know the customs, the culture, or the rules of engagements. I described my extreme disorientation in a *Many Voices* article ("Learning to Navigate in a New Landscape: Difficulties of Getting Better." MV, April 2004).

At that time, I was hungry to talk to people who were going through what I was, but I couldn't find a support group in New York City, where I live, so I decided to start one. It was a huge undertaking. After I took care of the logistics—finding a meeting room in a local community agency and renting a post office box—I needed to contact potential members. *Many Voices* helped by publishing a notice about the group, and the last President of the now inactive NYSSMP&D (of which I used to be a member) generously offered to let me use their mailing list.

And so New Landscape was started in November 2004. It is a peer-led support group for men and women who are healing from DID/MPD or another dissociative disorder (therapists who are healing from a dissociative disorder are welcome). We have about 12 members—a core of 4 or 5 regulars, and others who come some months and not others. We are hoping to grow.

Our monthly, two-hour meetings follow a strict format. We begin and end exactly on time. The first hour-and-a-half is devoted to sharing. It begins with the moderator reading the sharing guidelines. They are intended to foster safety and include:

- \* Raise your hand and wait to be recognized by the moderator before speaking.
- \* Address your comments to the group as a whole, not to any individual member.
- \* Speak from the "I" perspective.

This means speak from your own experience. Example: "I feel..." "I did..."

- \* Do not give advice.
- \* Do not ask for advice or information during the meeting. But it is permissible to say something like: "If anyone knows of a group on Long Island, please see me after the meeting." OR "If anyone would like to exchange phone numbers, please see me after the meeting."

\* Please feel free not to answer a question, even in a private conversation before or after the meeting. You might say something like, "I'm not comfortable answering that."

\* Confidentiality: What you see and hear in this room should remain in this room.

\* You don't have to talk; no one will call on you.

\* Alters are welcome, as long as they respect the guidelines.

Next, the floor is open for topic suggestions. There are usually two or three. Examples of topics from past meetings are:

\* Feeling cut off from your insides as you get better.

\* Allocating time—to various activities or various alters.

\* Therapists: Feeling your therapist is off track. Feeling your therapist is your only real connection in the world. Other therapist issues.

\* Functioning—sometimes gets worse as you get better.

\* Feelings: Feeling more emotion in parts that previously had no feeling. Feeling too strongly. Not feeling at all.

\* Experience of an integration of a part. Knowledge and feelings resulting from that integration.

\* Finding ways of listening to your parts. Ignoring your parts. Staying in touch with yourself.

\* Doing things socially with non-DID/MPD people.

- \* Self-injury.
- \* Anger issues.
- \* Coming out of the DID/MPD closet.
- \* Relapses: How they make you feel; dealing with them.
- \* Having fun—sometimes it takes planning. Different ways to do it.

After the topics are out on the floor, the sharing begins. Participants have the option of sharing on or off the topics. (Because the topics are usually issues that some participants have been dealing with in the weeks prior to the meeting, and because other participants often identify with those same issues, 95% of the time peoples' shares relate to the topics.)

Until a few months ago, there was no limit on how long someone could talk once recognized by the moderator. Some people spoke for 2 or 3 minutes, others for 10-15. As we are hoping to grow and realized that that might not work with a larger number of people, we agreed on a new method. Each person may share several times, as before, but now each individual share is allocated a maximum of 6 minutes. The moderator gives a warning when there are 2 minutes left, and again when there is 1 left. Of course, the person may stop speaking before 6 minutes if he/she wishes. This new procedure seems to be working well.

The last half hour of the meeting is devoted to a discussion of the group format and organization. This "business meeting" was originally intended to continue just for the first few months, when the group was forming, after which the half-hour would be added to the sharing portion of the meeting. But members said they liked the business meeting and wanted it to continue—it enables everyone to feel part of shaping the group. (The business meeting also serves as a buffer between the end of the sharing portion and return to the outside world.) Some issues

discussed at past business meetings are:

- \* Sharing guidelines (including the change to the 6-minute time allocation).

- \* Writing a pamphlet about our group (for new members and for publicity).

- \* Deciding whether to open New Landscape meetings to observers: psych students, clinicians who are not dissociative, etc. (We decided not to.)

- \* Defining the purpose of New Landscape: whether we wanted to educate the public about DID/MPD as well as provide peer support. (We decided that for now, it would be for peer support only.)

- \* Outreach—increasing our membership.

New Landscape sends out monthly mailings to everyone on the mailing list (the 180 people include both therapists and clients). These mailings used to contain just the meeting announcement and FAQ's. Last summer, we inaugurated the Writing Project, and that is now included in the mailings. The Writing Project is a forum for anyone wishing to share—those who come to meetings as well as those who don't. People can send submissions by email or post office mail. (The guidelines for Writing Project submissions are the same as those for sharing at the meeting.)

The Writing Project also contains a list of topics talked about at the last meeting. Because we received a positive response to mailing out the list of topics, we expanded it to include abstracts of what was discussed about each topic. Some people on the mailing list liked this expanded version—they emailed to say that even though they didn't come to meetings, they felt as if they were there. But it turned out to be a mistake, because though no names or identifying information were given, some people who came to meetings said they didn't feel safe talking when they knew what they said might be abstracted. So at one of our business meetings, we decided that if even one person wasn't comfortable with the abstracts, we would drop them. Now the Writing Project includes only a list

of the topics discussed, but nothing that was said about those topics.

People who attend meetings in person say they like New Landscape because it is a place where they can be with peers who are on the same journey they are. They can share their experiences in a safe, non-judgmental environment. They can be heard and recognized for who they are, validated just by being listened to and understood. They can talk about things they might not be able to share with non-DID/MPD people. They can also hear how others deal with some of the same issues and challenges they may be facing.

Everyone who comes to meetings in person agrees that we would like the number of in-person participants to grow. We know (from emails) that there are people on the mailing list who don't come to meetings, but who follow our group and like getting the monthly mailings. Some live too far. Some are not sure they fit the definition of an "almost-better" DID/MPD person, which was the way we originally described the New Landscape membership. Others may not feel safe enough to come. Still others are therapists who like to keep informed of our activities through the mailings, and who we hope will tell their dissociative clients about the group.

One of the topics discussed at the business meetings was redefining who New Landscape is for. We decided to drop the term "almost-better." In its place we came up with a longer description: "New Landscape is for anyone (male or female) who is healing from DID/MPD or another dissociative disorder and would like to share experiences, thoughts, and feelings with peers. New Landscape participants are in the process of reclaiming self and life. They may still have a dissociative system, but they have a framework for understanding it. They may still have abreactions and crises, but they are able to cope with them outside the group. (New Landscape does not provide crisis support.)"

We hope that this change in definition, along with the pamphlet we just developed and our list of FAQ's

(see below), will help our in-person membership to grow. We are selective about where we publicize New Landscape, because we don't want to attract voyeurs; that's why we don't use the Internet. But we are exploring other ways of getting the word out to as many therapists and dissociative clients as we can in the New York metropolitan area. Anyone reading this who thinks New Landscape might be for them and would like to give it a try is welcome to come to one of our meetings. (Please contact us by email or snail-mail for meeting particulars.)

### FAQ's

Q: Do you have to be integrated to come to New Landscape meetings?

A: No.

Q: What if you don't have integration as a goal?

A: Everyone's goal is different. New Landscape doesn't care what your goal is, or whether you even have one.

Q: Do you have to be in therapy?

A: No (as long as you understand your system and are able to cope with your ups and downs, and as long as you are able to comply with the group's guidelines).

Q: How do you join?

A: If you would like to attend, just show up at the meeting. You don't have to sign up ahead of time.

Q: Is there a charge?

A: No. If you wish, you may make a donation, but it's fine if you don't. (Donations help cover our expenses, which consist of meeting room rental, duplicating, and postage.)

Q: How can I contact New Landscape?

A: newlandscape1@yahoo.com (there is a numeral "one" after newlandscape).

PO Box 231315, New York, NY 10023.