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Breaking Free: My Life With Dissociative Identity Disorder



Synopsis

The NFL legend and Heisman Trophy winner shares the inspiring story of his life and diagnosis with dissociative identity disorder. Herschel Walker is widely regarded as one of football's greatest running backs. He led the University of Georgia to victory in the Sugar Bowl on the way to an NCAA Championship and he capped a sensational college career by earning the 1982 Heisman Trophy. Herschel spent twelve years in the NFL, where he rushed for more than eight thousand yards and scored sixty-one rushing touchdowns. But despite the acclaim he won as a football legend, track star, Olympic competitor, and later a successful businessman, Herschel realized that his life, at times, was simply out of control. He often felt angry, self-destructive, and unable to connect meaningfully with friends and family. Drawing on his deep faith, Herschel turned to professionals for help and was ultimately diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, formerly known as multiple personality disorder. While some might have taken this diagnosis as a setback, Herschel approached his mental health with the same indomitable spirit he brought to the playing field. It also gave him, for the first time, insight into his life's unexplained passages, stretches of time that seemed forever lost. Herschel came to understand that during those times, his "alters," or alternate personalities, were in control. Born into a poor, but loving family in the South, Herschel was an overweight child with a stutter who suffered terrible bullying at school. He now understands that he created "alters" who could withstand abuse. But beyond simply enduring, other "alters" came forward to help Herschel overcome numerous obstacles and, by the time he graduated high school, become an athlete recognized on a national level. In *Breaking Free*, Herschel tells his story "from the joys and hardships of childhood to his explosive impact on college football to his remarkable professional career. And he gives voice and hope to those suffering from DID. Herschel shows how this disorder played an integral role in his accomplishments and how he has learned to live with it today. His compelling account testifies to the strength of the human spirit and its ability to overcome any challenge.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Touchstone; Reprint edition (January 13, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1416537503

ISBN-13: 978-1416537502

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (47 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #306,735 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #47 in Â Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Mental Health > Dissociative Disorders #148 in Â Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Mental Illness #245 in Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Sports & Outdoors > Football

Customer Reviews

Overall, I liked this book. One has to admire Herschel for going public with his diagnosis, one poorly understood by the general public and often associated with severe pathology. That took courage, which the author seems to have in abundance. His writing shows an intelligence not commonly associated with sports, and he gives articulate expression to the various manifestations of his version of DID. A real plus of Walker's account is that he describes an "up" side to this condition, stating clearly for the layperson that it has certain adaptive and self-protecting qualities. That said, I was left with some questions. While the book seemed forthright and honest, he describes about a dozen different "alters" (formerly called multiple personalities) that he claims have arisen from his being tormented as a fat and stuttering schoolboy--while undoubtedly painful, his schoolyard abuse is hardly the type that normally spawns this fragmented condition. And as a clinical psychologist, I have treated DID patients. A more common presentation than his involves distinct changes in personality including voice, body posture, emotional expression, etc. . . . like you are really seeing different people. He says that his shifts were more subtle, nothing that could be seen externally, more like discrete changes in mental state known only to him at the time. That raises (for me, at least) the issue of whether or not this devoted and highly focused athlete is not simply given to a rather strict compartmentalization of his feelings, a medium that he would admit he is not comfortable with. Even his most personal relationships have suffered from his tendency to be so self-contained. Or perhaps DID is best explained as a "spectrum" disorder, ranging in degree of severity, as we now know autism to be.

Just finished reading Hershel's book and found the story very interesting as story about how to survive the crueling life of a football player but not informative enough about the DID diagnosis. I purchased this book because I was excited to hear of someone else who had this condition. As I read on I was hoping to read more about the alters and how the alters "switched" in and out to complete any one task. Since I survived my horrific childhood with "alter" help, I had hoped to read

more detail. I'd be interested in meeting and sitting down with Hershel to share some of the "alter chaos" that wasn't written in his book and my story. I, like Hershel, felt the importance of sharing my story as to help others understand the amazing way our minds can protect us while we are suffering through abuse. I believe DID/MPD is a God sent coping mechanism. I shared my life story in the book, "Switching Time" by author Richard Baer. Although no two cases are the same I found too many differences that have me wondering whether or not this was truly a case of DID? For me, my "alters" weren't so consistant. I accomplished many great things but could never have spent many years in a rigorous exercise schedule to accomplish something as great as becoming a professional football player. However, I've spent many years watching my son play baseball and witness the change in his personality when he is concentrating on baseball. He is in a zone and nothing around him distracts him. I also imagine that those who serve our country, as in the Marines, switch into combat mode when needed. They are also in a different "zone" to fight and protect. I know this because my son is also a Marine who served in Iraq. And he does not have DID.

I enjoyed reading "Breaking Free" by Herschel Walker, but was a bit disappointed by it because it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. He never told how his family reacted to his diagnosis of DID, nor where he was as far as his therapy today, or where he was as far as integration. I know he was trying to remove the stygma from DID, but not having suffered the extreme abuse I did, it was hard to relate to him. Also he may have grown up with very little as I did, but he's never suffered the financial hardships I have as an adult because of extreme panic and anxiety disorders I have a hard time holding a job. Plus during my abuse I received permanent damage to some of my joints and have to deal with pain on a daily basis. Unfortunately for me I don't have an alter who can take the pain so I don't have to deal with it. Where as he's got the freedom to announce to the world that he's DID, if I did that I'd have to share what caused my DID. Since I've already lost my extended family because they don't believe me about my abuse and men in my family are some of my abusers, I don't have the freedom to share my diagnosis with anyone outside my adult children, husband and one good friend and of course my therapist. This makes me feel very isolated and alone. I know Herschel understands the loneliness and isolation, but when I'm ready to write my autobiography I will have to use a "Pen Name". There are those in my family who might sue me for defamation of character as one of my abusers is in full time ministry and it would destroy his ministry, and as a Christian I just can't do that no matter what he did to me. I am glad Herschel was able to share his story and that he's benefited from it, as I'm sure others have, but I don't have the freedom he has to share his story.

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