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Cameron West, who suffered from Dissociative Identity Disorder, discusses his new book, "First Person Plural." West and his wife have struggled with this multiple personality condition, which at one time had him believing he had 24 personalities.

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

Transcript
First Person Plural

KATIE COURIC, co-host:

A child who has to cope with the trauma of sexual abuse sometimes reacts by developing dissociative identity disorder, or multiple personalities, as an adult. In his current best seller, Cameron West recounts his own experience in "First Person Plural: My Life As A Multiple." He's joined by his wife, Rikki West. Good morning to both of you. Thanks so much for being here.

Mr. CAMERON WEST ("First Person Plural"): Good morning, Katie.

Ms. RIKKI WEST (Cameron West): Good morning, Katie.

COURIC: Nice to see you. I understand, Cam, that you were 38 years old when you realized that you had DID. What happened?

Mr. WEST: I knew something was wrong with me for quite awhile, Katie, but I was recovering from a long-term illness, maybe 10 years. And my—I felt kind of, let's see, as if inside my head, I--I'd always heard voices, but inside my head was getting very loud. And at the very moment that I was getting better and starting to feel healthy again, those—it was as if people were inside my head banging, trying to get out. And then things started to crumble. And you know--you knew what was happening. I said, `Rikki, I'm in trouble here.'

Ms. WEST: Yeah. It became clear that there was something going on that wasn't normal. A lot of things that--that had been happening, I think, we attributed to Cam's physical illness, and once he was physically well, there was still this commotion, this strange stuff going on in his head. And--and I suggested that he see a therapist at that point.

COURIC: You started--a--some--a voice came out of your mouth that was not your own, reading the street signs?

Mr. WEST: That's true. And mispronouncing them, too.

COURIC: Who was that?

Mr. WEST: That was Davy. A four-year-old alter. So, I pulled off the road as fast as I could, tried to get
into--I just happened to be near a psychiatric hospital, and I tried to pull in, but I couldn't—just couldn't figure out how to get in there. And I had a cell phone, and I called the therapist I was seeing at that point, and the next thing I knew, I was back home and she was talking to Rikki, and things started to unfold from there.

COURIC: So Davy was the first alter so-called personality that—who emerged.
Mr. WEST: Yeah.

COURIC: Who were some of the others, then, who followed Davy?
Mr. WEST: There was Clay, who was eight years old. He came out and abreacted, which is, re-lived some experiences of horrible abuse, unfortunately, at the hands of my mother. And...

COURIC: And your grandmother?
Mr. WEST: And my grandmother. That was some pretty terrible stuff.

COURIC: Who else? Who else was in there?
Mr. WEST: There was Annie and Tr--Anna and Trudi, they're four, and Dusty, who is 12. Wyatt, who is nine years old.
Ms. WEST: There are some adult alters. There's Per, who's a very serene and quiet and gentle part of Cam. There's Bart, who's very lively, funny, humorous. There's Lief, who's a real, tough, go-getter.
COURIC: Driven.
Ms. WEST: Driven. They are the parts of Cam.
COURIC: So, at one point, there were 24 alters...
Ms. WEST: Mm-hmm.
Mr. WEST: Yeah.
COURIC: ...and now it is down to how many?
Mr. WEST: There's a core group of eight of us who come out with frequency on a daily basis. We have a son, Kyle, who is now almost 12, and from the start, Rikki knew that I was really in crisis, our family was in crisis and we wanted to keep a stable home for Kyle. So, Rikki held us together, and eventually moved us across the country from Massachusetts to California, and made an agreement with the alters that they wouldn't come out when Kyle was around, because he would sense that something was wrong, and he'd say, Dad is going out. That was his way of saying it.
COURIC: When another personality would take over?
Mr. WEST: Right. He'd know that.
COURIC: When I read about that, the fact that you were able to not go into a different personality when your son was present, it made me think, well, if that's the case, why can't you control it all the time? Why not just submerge these so-called alters in your--into your subconsciousness? Wouldn't your life be a lot easier if you were just one person?
Mr. WEST: Life would definitely be easier if I was one person. In fact, I am one person, but parts of my mind split off in order to protect me as a child from things that were overwhelming to me. Some kids are—they have the capacity to do that. Everybody knows that some kids have imaginary friends. Well, in my case, I had a lot of imaginary friends who were able to just segment themselves in parts of my mind...
COURIC: It was your coping mechanism.
Mr. West: Exactly.
COURIC: But--but, if you can control it when your son is there, can you not control it all the time? In other words, is this something that you have no control--do you understand my point?
Mr. West: Yeah, I do understand your point. There are--the alters are all parts of me, and if I suppress them, then I'm--I'm doing a disservice to them, so they really need to have a chance to be out in order for me to be in the whole--become whole and become a more cohesive person and live a more full life. But because we have co-consciousness, which is a shared awareness between the alters, then the important part is for us to communicate with each other, and they get a chance to come out and be with Rikki or in therapy.
COURIC: You--you talk to all of these personalities on a daily basis?
Ms. West: I do. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.
COURIC: What a weird life you must have.
Ms. West: It's different.
COURIC: It must be so challenging.
Ms. West: Yeah, it is definitely not your ordinary marriage, not your ordinary relationship, not--not your ordinary family. But, we--we do what we need to do, and my goal when this all happened and our family went into crisis, my goal was to protect my husband, to protect my child, and to save our family because families have challenges that are very difficult. Ours was unique, and--and particularly difficult, but--but I wanted to keep us together and stay connected and keep my relationship and my marriage strong and provide a--a normal, regular life for my son.
COURIC: As you well know, a lot of people think this whole concept of--of dissociative identity disorder is just a bunch of bunk. There are many, many skeptics around.
Ms. West: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.
COURIC: Let me read a quote from USA Today recently. "The old-fashioned name for it was hysteria, says Herbert Spiegel, a New York psychiatrist who knew the real Sybil and came to believe she was coached and trained to act out her 16 personalities. He says that a true multiple personality that occurs spontaneously is rare. Most cases reported today, he says, are the products of poorly trained therapists working with highly suggestible patients, eager to make their lives more dramatic."
Mr. West: Imagine that.
Ms. West: That kind of drama we certainly didn't need in our life.
COURIC: But some people might say, 'Hey, they've gone to Hollywood, Robin Williams is making a movie about this book.'
COURIC: Funny you should say that, Katie. That's all after the fact because we lived through five and a half years of hell and struggled our way back, and I was eventually able to get my doctorate in psychology to learn more about my condition and about how the human mind works. And through that, I discovered a love of writing, and the natural extension of that was to write prose, and the first book that was--was in the way for me was to write "First Person Plural." I wanted to explore what had happened to me as part of my healing and to express to other people, who didn't understand what the experience is like because this is just part of the human condition.
Everybody faces challenges in their lives. This may be an unusual challenge, but everybody needs to have hope in their life and to try to overcome their challenges. We're--we're a family that has done that, and we've been touched by the people who've responded to--200 people a day are responding to our Web site from all over the country.

COURIC: It's a fascinating story.
Mr. WEST: Thank you.
COURIC: Cameron and Rikki West, thanks so much for coming in. Best of luck to--to you and your family. We appreciate your coming by.
Mr. WEST: Thanks, Katie.