



# FIRE OF THE MIND

*By James Abendroth*

Too often in fantasy, villains are portrayed as “mad,” or “insane,” for the sake of convenience. A madman is easy to dehumanize, making them like any other monster to be hated, pitied, then mercilessly destroyed, often in that order. Their deplorable actions are driven by a warped perception of reality, but not all such people are evil.

## Understanding Mental Illnesses

A character burdened with a mental disorder presents unique roleplaying and gameplay options for both players

and Game Masters. Ignorance and misinformation are the greatest threats to those with a mental disorder, even in modern times, when many disorders have been classified and researched in detail. In a world of medieval fantasy, the average, uninformed commoner has every reason to fear people he doesn’t understand.

In real life, many mental disorders are genetic and follow a person from birth to death. Others, like posttraumatic stress disorder, can be acquired through prolonged mental trauma. In fantasy settings, evil curses are analogous to most mental disorders. The dark arts are capable of splitting someone’s personality, removing her ability to speak, and even causing horrifying hallucinations. The modern, scientific names of these disorders may not suit all gaming groups, but in a world of magic

and mystery, common definitions can help a group of gamers understand what is happening around them.

In regards to their methods of acquisition and curing, all of the following disorders can be treated as a type of Indefinite Madness, as found in the fifth-edition GM's core rulebook.

## Multiple Personality Disorder

Multiple Personality Disorder—known today as Dissociative Identity Disorder, or DID—is usually induced by severe childhood trauma. This causes one's personality to fragment (“dissociate”) into multiple personas. Unlike the steady stream of thoughts most people experience, a person suffering from DID will sometimes have a jolt where his thoughts are not connected from one moment to the next. In severe cases, this gap can be so massive that it creates separate personalities. These personalities can be so diverse as to have different behaviors, mannerisms, gender identities and even physical differences such hand dominance, eyesight strength and allergies. A sudden change between these different personalities, or “alters,” is usually triggered by sudden or prolonged stress.

Alters are sometimes, but not always, aware of each other's existence. They are also not fully aware of each other's memories and generally experience another personality's period of dominance as lost time and are unable to account for their actions or locations when they are not dominant. The novel (and film) *Fight Club* is a well-known dramatization of DID.

Despite how disruptive the real world disorder is, it is easy to see why those who suffer from DID are often the focus of fictional stories, and for the same reasons, they make fascinating characters in role playing games. Each different personality can have completely different viewpoints about morality and justice and generally are unaware of what the other personalities do when they are dominant.

*For player characters.* Because of how radically different the various alters can be, a player creating a character with DID could make several different characters. Each should have similar ability scores, but there can be some variation, especially in mental scores. All alters have different traits, ideals, flaws, and bonds that reflect their own personalities and goals. Most alters also have different classes (or subclasses) to differentiate themselves on a mechanical level. Players should keep in mind that stress often triggers shifts in alters. Combat or other tense situations could easily change the dominant personality, forcing a suave, diplomatic persona into control in the middle of combat or a barbaric alter in control when stealth is required. An inconvenient alter swap is a great complication if your group is playing with the “plot points” variant from the fifth-edition GM's core rulebook.

*For Game Masters.* What better place to hide a diabolical villain than inside the body of an innocent person? Assuming he is able to keep his physical appearance secret, there is no way to detect him when he is not dominant. Even if he is seen while committing a crime, the alter's distinct mannerisms will throw off eyewitnesses, and an innocent, unaware alter will deny committing a crime with complete honesty.

Even societies that have otherwise infallible methods of determining a person's guilt or innocence could be foiled by such a villain. Unless the villainous alter was in control, the dominant personality would not believe that it had done anything wrong and may not have any memory of the crimes done while his body was under the control of another alter. It would

pass any lie detector test given, whether mechanical or mystical and even reading his thoughts or analyzing his memories would not garner the truth about what was done while another alter was in power.

## Aphasia

Aphasia is a general term for a variety of disorders that interfere with normal comprehension and production of speech. In the real world, it generally stems from some sort of brain trauma that damages the language centers of the brain, and comes in two common forms, which we now call Broca's and Wernicke's aphasia, named for the areas of the brain they damage.

People suffering from Broca's aphasia find it difficult to get words out. It is often a visible struggle for them to express themselves and they speak in short, halting sentences. Even more frustrating, people suffering from Broca's aphasia are generally quite aware of the problems they are having communicating and simply cannot do anything about it. They are trapped with complex thoughts and ideas that they cannot express properly.

Those suffering from Wernicke's aphasia are afflicted with the opposite problem. When they speak, their sentences sound superficially eloquent, but are actually gibberish or peppered with unrecognizable, unnecessary or incorrect words. Worse, unlike those with Broca's, they don't realize that they are having communications problems. To them, what they are saying makes complete sense and the people they are speaking to cannot understand them.

In both cases, aphasia affects the language centers directly so they are not confined to a single language. A person who is fluent in Common and Draconic has the same problems in both languages if they suffer from aphasia. Even sign languages and written language would be affected, as it is not the verbal and aural portions of language that are hampered, but the actual production and comprehension of words.

*For player characters.* All characters that suffer from Broca's aphasia have disadvantage on Charisma (Persuasion) checks that depend on speaking.

A character suffering from Wernicke's aphasia has almost no social skills as they are completely incapable of voicing a coherent message. They suffer a -10 penalty on all Charisma checks, but given the nature of the disorder, they would likely think that they were quite eloquent. Success on social checks, despite this penalty, is all thanks to luck or nonverbal charm.

*Aphasiacs and spells.* Spellcasters who suffer from aphasia are at an acute disadvantage. When someone with Broca's aphasia casts a spell that requires verbal components, there is a 25% chance the spell will fail, wasting the spell slot. Their magical abilities have grown stronger to compensate: all spells that deal variable damage have their effects increased by one die (e.g., a 3<sup>rd</sup>-level *fireball* spell deals 9d6 fire damage instead of 8d6). For those with Wernicke's, their chance of spell failure is increased to 90%, but the variable effects of the spells they cast are instead boosted by two dice. Spells affected by Subtle Spell metamagic do not have this failure chance.

Because of the interference to their language centers, people suffering from Broca's aphasia gain advantage on saves against charm spells that are language-dependent. People suffering from Wernicke's aphasia are immune, since they cannot comprehend the commands they are being given.

*As a Game Master.* Adventure hooks that introduce aphasia must highlight the confusion of losing one's eloquence, but shouldn't completely frustrate the players. If a famous diplomat or magic-user is

suddenly unable to verbally communicate, how would she try and find help? Even while seeking the heroes' assistance, she is limited in her ability to explain her affliction and the circumstances surrounding it.

## Schizophrenia

Defined as a severe break with reality, schizophrenia is among the most common serious mental disorders. Despite what popular media might suggest, schizophrenia is not synonymous with multiple personality disorder. As a side effect or cause, this break can include both hallucinations and delusions and those with schizophrenia find it impossible to separate what is real from what is caused by their disorder.

These hallucinations are often auditory in form (the stereotypical "voices in a person's head") and often include bizarre commands or ideas that the victim feels are not his own and compelled to follow. Though these are the most obvious hindrances, a schizophrenic's most debilitating symptoms are their inability to order their thoughts or plan even the simplest of tasks.

*As a player character.* For the reasons above, a character suffering from schizophrenia in a game is at a serious tactical disadvantage. Even if he is not suffering from any major hallucinations or delusions, he will be incapable of committing to any long-term plans. A character who is suffering from spontaneous hallucinations and delusions will be particularly susceptible to illusory effects, and has disadvantage on saves against illusions.

*As a Game Master.* In a fantasy game, there are plenty of individuals who experience magical visions. Some or all of these "hallucinations" could actually be messages from spiritual forces invisible to other mortals. A player character who suddenly suffers from horrifying, shocking, or simply bizarre hallucinations is a plot hook that instantly forces the party into action.

Perhaps this mental disorder is a side-effect of a mind-invading psion the party fought in another dungeon. Or maybe infernal forces are projecting evil spirits into the material world in an attempt to disorient the heroes before they launch an attack. When schizophrenia is introduced in this way, finding a way to cure it is imperative; it's a heavy burden for one character to bear, and most players want to feel empowered when playing a fantasy game. Even if they have to go on a quest to slay a brain-eating aberration or meet with a noble celestial to cure their disorder, regaining a stable worldview should be an exciting journey for your player.

Alternatively, a party could be approached by a quest giver seeking a cure. Worse, perhaps someone might approach the party with evidence that a prophet or high-ranking religious official was not receiving messages from some divine source, but rather was actually suffering from schizophrenia. Do they attempt to cover up this scandal, or do they attempt to help the prophet cope with her affliction?

## Paranoid Schizophrenia

In some ways, paranoid schizophrenia is a milder form of the previous disorder. Paranoid schizophrenics still suffer from disordered thoughts, but can often function relatively normally and are better at hiding their condition. Unlike other schizophrenics, paranoid schizophrenics irrationally believe that they have been singled out for persecution by some powerful entity or organization.

Most of the victim's experiences are interpreted as attacks against him

by this persecutor. Even mundane coincidences take on a sinister tinge to a paranoid schizophrenic, and he becomes certain that innocent people are actively involved in his ongoing torment. If he happens to see the same person in a crowd twice, he may become convinced that the person is following him and is a part of the conspiracy against him. It is almost impossible for someone suffering this form of the disorder to trust anyone else.

*As a player character.* A paranoid schizophrenic character is less complicated to play than a typical schizophrenic, but their inability to trust others makes working in a team difficult. A character suffering from this disorder has disadvantage on all Charisma saving throws, but has advantage on saves against enchantment spells.

When playing a character affected in this way, his disorder may have been the reason he started adventuring, if only to avoid his persecutors (which could be almost anyone) or to uncover the conspiracy. He may believe that the person he believes is behind this conspiracy is someone with a great deal of authority or power, perhaps even a king or a dragon.

*As a Game Master.* There is one particularly powerful and well known example of paranoid schizophrenia in the fantasy genre. In the *Lord of the Rings* series, Gollum's erratic, paranoid behavior was caused by the power and domination of the One Ring. In a pre-scientific world, corrupting magic like the Ring's could be the cause of such a disorder. The advice for playing NPCs with schizophrenia also applies to paranoid schizophrenic NPCs. If you have a

paranoid schizophrenic character in your game, you can influence how his paranoia manifests. Is it plot important? Or perhaps villains take advantage of it, creating a fictitious secret society to draw the heroes off their scent (*"I knew the Sisters of the Eye were behind it all!"*).

Alternatively, a paranoid schizophrenic NPC may unwittingly fool the heroes into believing that the government is out to kill him. This character believes his paranoid claims wholeheartedly, and Wisdom (Insight) checks or spells like *zone of truth* would have no effect.

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