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Disabled Characters in Movies: The Controversy and Science Behind the Screen

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Staff Piece

As the new M. Night Shyamalan movie, *Glass*, the final part in the *Unbreakable* series, is set to come out, the roles of three disabled men come back into the spotlight. The men have osteogenesis imperfecta, dissociative identity disorder, and remarkable strength, respectively. The first two illnesses that these characters possess are real afflictions that affect real people. With the portrayal of characters with these diseases, there are groups that are upset with the way that it has been [dramatized](#). In the movie *Split*, which preceded the movie *Glass*, the portrayal of DID was widely dramatized with the character having twenty-three personalities and each personality having different afflictions. People are also talking about the inclusion of disabled actors with Osteogenesis imperfecta as a way to make a more realistic film.

Osteogenesis imperfecta (OI) is a genetic disease that is characterized by brittle bones that are not formed correctly and break easily. This disease is very rare, variable, and complicated. In 90% of cases, the cause is a faulty gene that reduces the amount or quality of collagen in bones. In the other 10% of cases, it's caused by mutation in both recessive and dominant genes. This disease affects about [25,000 to 50,000 people](#) in the United States per year, but with the proper care and attention, these people can lead semi-normal lives. OI can cause other medical issues including asthma, stunted growth, hearing loss, brittle teeth, vision problems, cardiac issues, and fatigue. There is a range of severity and cases are labeled as mild, moderate, or fatal. In addition to this, there are six types of OI that range in severity, life expectancy, bone breakage, and deformity. Type I is the mildest form and generally does not affect life expectancy, while Type II is the most severe form with death usually at birth. Type III has a varied life expectancy with bone fractures at birth and breathing problems, while Type IV is a moderate form with a somewhat average life expectancy and some deformity. Type V is a moderate form similar to type IV. Type VI is the rarest form and is characterized as moderate with a characteristic bone type. The character in *Glass* is never given a specific type, but it can be assumed that he has either Type III or Type VI based on his description.

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), or multiple personality disorder, is a mental illness that is characterized by two or more distinct personalities that each have unique characteristics. This disorder is a severe form of dissociation which causes a loss of connection in a person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions, and feelings of identity. A person may dissociate and start to behave like another person or like they are in a haze. They could have different writing and drawing habits, and seemingly different lives. DID also comes with a form of amnesia and prevents the person from being fully able to remember things from when they were in their dissociative state. This disorder is caused by long term extreme trauma in the person's early life. The mind then tries to find ways to cope with that trauma and creates different "compartments" in the mind that try to help heal in different ways. It is unknown exactly how many people suffer from this disease, but from a [small study](#) it can be estimated that about 1.5% - 7% of people are affected each year. Women do tend to be more affected than men but both genders are almost equally likely to get the disease if they have experienced the same long term trauma.

People who are afflicted with DID and OI feel that the misrepresentation of their diseases in these movies leads to a false perception of them as highly unstable people, which is not always the case. Most people with DID can function similarly to others and people with OI are able to live relatively long lives with minimal bone breakage. Many people believe that with the inclusion of disabled actors in movies, such as a person with OI, movies could be more representative of reality, even in the fantasy genre. With the perspective of disabled actors, there would be less false dramatization and a better understanding of these diseases in the real world. Most importantly, less stigma would form against the people affected.

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