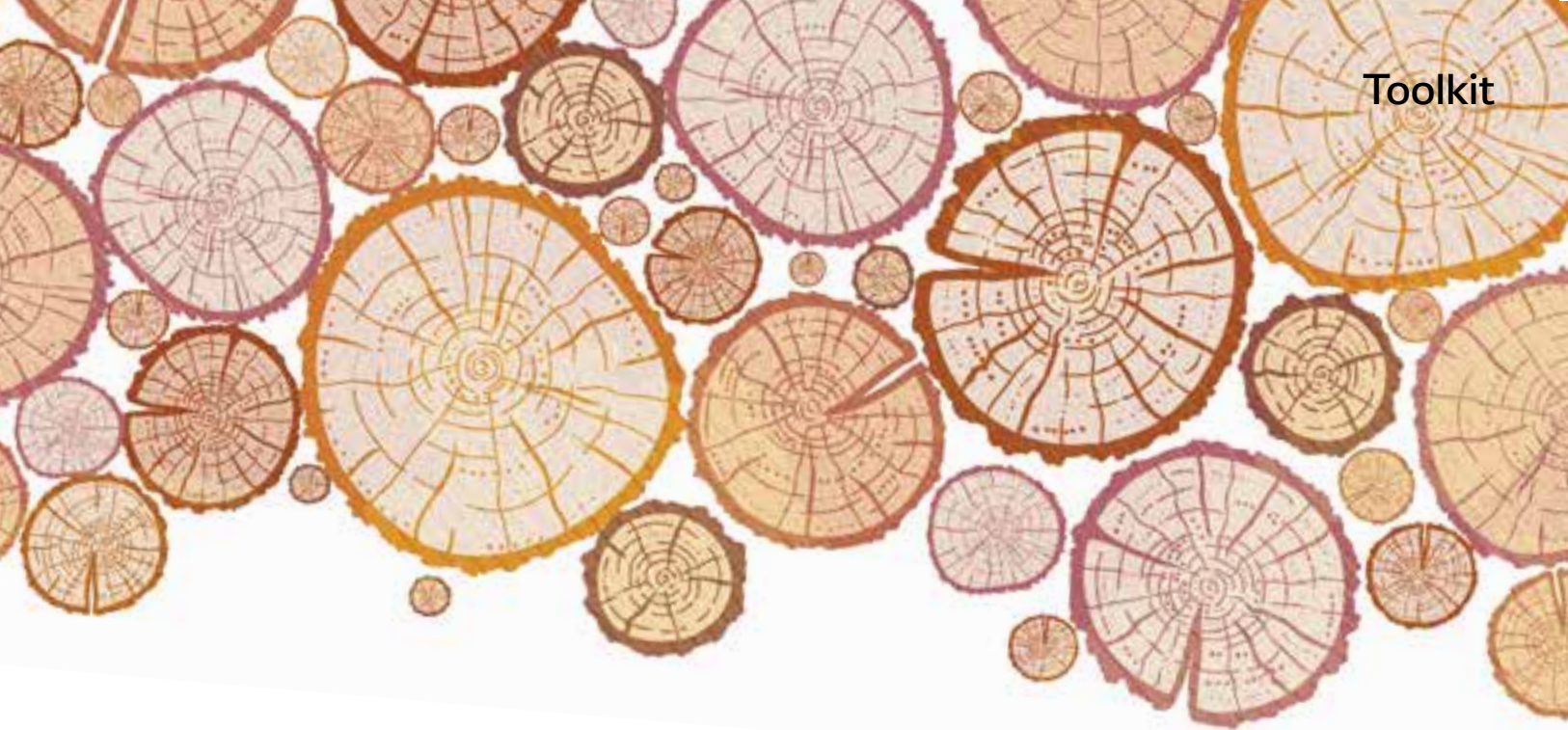

Self in **internal family systems** therapy

Emma Redfern talks to **Robin Shoet** about her new multi-author book showcasing supervision in the internal family systems model



As one of few approved internal family systems (IFS) clinical consultants in the UK, certified IFS therapist, Emma Redfern felt called to create a book for the IFS community showcasing supervision and consultation of the model. Inspired by her training in Hawkins and Shohet's seven-eyed model of supervision,^{1,2} she developed a corresponding model for IFS, with the support of colleague Liz Martins. One aspect of this model is called the eight facets of IFS supervision. Facet 1 (the additional 'eye'), relates to Self, the 'game changer' at the heart of IFS.³

Robin Shohet recently read a pre-publication copy of the IFS supervision book, *Internal Family Systems Therapy: supervision and consultation*. Here, he talks to Emma to find out more.

Robin: *I haven't read all of the book yet, but it has had a very interesting impact on me and made me want to know about IFS. Could you offer a summary of what it is for readers, please?*

Emma: IFS posits that the natural state of humanity is one of multiplicity, with each of us having many autonomous personalities inside, called 'parts', as well as an inner healing energy, called 'Self', who is the ideal leader of the

inner system. The parts are experienced as either protective or protected. By this, we mean some parts, called 'exiles', hold aspects of experience, memories, qualities etc, called 'burdens,' that the system feels are dangerous. The parts called 'protectors' have the task or job of keeping these vulnerable and wounded parts exiled so that we can each function and survive well enough in our lives and in our societies. IFS can be used as a psycho-spiritual practice for living, and it is a transformative psychotherapy⁴ in which exiles can release their burdens, enabling protectors to be freed to find new and often less demanding roles inside.

Robin: *Tell me more about how IFS differs from other therapies that conceptualise 'parts' or 'subpersonalities', say voice dialogue or the subpersonalities of psychosynthesis?*

Emma: It's about building relationships between the parts, and between Self and these parts, which can bring more harmony inside. IFS also includes healing and transforming those parts that need and want healing by using the IFS model and the transformative relationship with Self.

An aim of Hal and Sidra Stone's voice dialogue is '...to learn how to channel every self, as well as our vulnerability,

through an aware ego.'⁵ Another goal is to learn to embrace all the inner 'selves', which they might also call the parts. I believe they place less emphasis on healing parts than IFS does.

Robin: *How do I know if I'm in my 'Self' or not?*

Self is our innate ability to connect and be present, to not fear and to know we are connected to life. Self-energy is both immanent and transcendent

Emma: Self is our innate ability to connect and be present, to not fear and to know we are connected to life. Self-energy is both immanent and transcendent. When Self-energy is actively available in a person, it can be recognised by the qualities (known in IFS as the eight Cs) of curiosity, compassion, connectedness, courage, confidence, clarity, creativity and calm. In addition, we open to an attitude of non-agenda, openness and acceptance that comes alongside our attachment to things - which is something the parts bring to our lives.



Robin: So, if I called this ‘Self’ your ‘Buddha nature’, would you object to that?

Emma: No, not at all, and in fact Schwartz has co-written a book in which he draws out the parallels with the various spiritual descriptions of *atman*, Buddha nature and so on.⁶ They are different names for the same stuff we all swim in.

Robin: How about you ask me how I understand ‘Self’?

Emma: Robin, how do you understand Self?

Robin: As I understand it, we are born with this Self with a capital S as part of our inheritance, our humanity, just as we are born with faces and arms and legs. It is both personal to us and impersonal simultaneously. The parts, as I understand it, are what I would call introjects: the beliefs we have swallowed undigested about ourselves and the world around us.

Emma: Well, in IFS terms, we are born with parts, some of whom do take on such beliefs. Parts are also more than the beliefs they hold; they are how Self navigates the world.

Robin: So, some parts get reinforced by experience, and yet it’s not all about taking in beliefs because you can look at a baby and think it has a very distinct personality.

Emma: Yes, it has distinct parts active and available in life. However, parts do what they need to do to survive, and some may take on extreme beliefs and characteristics from authority figures or because of difficult experiences. On

the other hand, you can sense a baby’s Self-energy. If the baby has good-enough holding, the baby’s parents’ Self-energy acts as a tuning fork for the infant’s Self-energy to resonate. Children of Self-led parents may, for example, grow up with fewer parts in conflict inside.

Robin: So, you’ve got these different parts and one of the things the book talks about is blending and differentiating the parts. So, if I have understood it correctly, if a part blends, one minute I can be compassionate and the next minute I could just turn on you.

Emma: That’s right. I often use the metaphor of an inner psychic bus, full of parts and Self, and it’s a question of who is driving the bus. One minute there is compassion and openness (metaphorically speaking, Self is in the driving seat), and the next minute, as you say, someone’s having a tantrum or is in tears driving the bus. This happens when a part in distress is blending strongly and that Self is no longer available to drive (ie lead the inner system). Ideally, we don’t want parts who are terrified driving our inner psychic bus and choosing who we marry or how we parent. This happens; it’s a fact of life; but ideally, parts can draw upon the resourcing that Self provides.

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Robin: And how do you help a part differentiate? Having a part drive could be compared to driving while under the influence of alcohol, and, of course, people who are driving under the influence of alcohol have a false sense of how capable they are at driving. So

how do you help a person recognise they’ve got a part in the driving seat?

Emma: Well, that’s a major focus in the three levels of IFS training. For now, I’ll provide examples of differentiating parts of a person in a way with which readers might be familiar.

When reflecting back what a client has told me, I might say, ‘Let me see if I’ve understood. When you first got the news, a part got triggered that felt angry and expressed that, then it sounded like a part felt bad for being angry.’ I may then invite the client to turn to what is happening in the moment, and say: ‘And now you are looking tearful and I’m wondering how old you feel in this moment?’

Another example of differentiation would be, ‘As you notice the part of you who really needs to make a decision on this, how do you feel towards it?’ If the client responds that they feel calm and compassionate (for example), then this suggests the presence of Self-energy. As a therapist, I would try to facilitate the Self of the client meeting the part.

Also, as a therapist, I am working internally with my parts to have my Self available inside me and for the client. So, it is important therapists spend time getting to know and differentiate their inner systems.

Robin: Emma, that reminds me, in your chapter you write about your early life – about being in an incubator and what that did for you.

I love autobiographical stuff because we are all living out our autobiographies – I don’t care what people say. This is my own story: I spent three weeks alone in hospital after my mother gave birth by caesarean, having been very miserable carrying me. She’d wanted an abortion, but she couldn’t leave my father because she had me. So, I’ve got a really deep pattern for dissociation and I’m quite difficult to touch. To compensate for this, I became very smart. It was very useful as a survival strategy. So, I’ve used a combination of being disassociated and being able to go up into my head and get my information from outside my body and from my intuition. My cleverness

has worked brilliantly for me, but it's all a defence at some level.

Emma: Yes, and that's one reason I love IFS so much because it brings out in us an appreciation for those defences or protector activities. For example, I would like to take a moment to appreciate those protectors you've just highlighted. They have helped you survive and flourish in the world. You went on to develop your supervision model, with colleagues, and this has been highly influential for me, in my training as a supervisor, which in turn influenced my journey towards getting this book published.

Robin: I love the use of the word 'protectors' because it is a language without judgment. IFS offers a beautiful framework and hope for working to release core beliefs, while honouring the protective layer. So, conceptually, it's not difficult to understand. Why does it require so much training?

Emma: I like that question. Although it's very simple in terms of its premisses, it is hard to put into action. So, for example, therapists have lots of therapist parts that might want to rescue or counter and control and tell a client to change their thoughts, or whatever. So, it's helping those parts to trust therapist's Self and give space to follow the client, meet the client (their parts and Self) and learn to not know what's going to come out of the client's mouth before it comes out of the client's mouth. That's hard for us therapists sometimes, so practice helps with this. There are mantras and acronyms we pick up in the training, such as Just Ask (ie ask the client and the client's part(s)) or WAIT (Why Am I Still Talking?).

It's the relational aspects we need to practise.

Robin: I think IFS appeals because it's saying what we all know intuitively.

Emma: Yes, I think that's part of the integrity of the model. Schwartz learnt it from his clients. They taught him, it was what was coming up between them, and he was noticing it and trying things, getting things wrong and the client would steer him right again. IFS is organic and intuitive when parts don't

try and control things, do things their way, or approach the process in a way that they learned from previous non-IFS therapy training, which may not be compatible in the moment with IFS.

... as a therapist I am working internally with my parts to have my Self available inside me and for the client. So, it is important therapists spend time getting to know and differentiate their inner systems

Robin: One of the reasons why I'm sympathetic to IFS, is a shared awareness that the best resource you have as a supervisor is to know yourself and that your job is also to help the therapist to know themselves.

In the interview with Schwartz in the book, he says he doesn't need to know a lot about the client and that's something we have in common. I say there is no client, there is only the therapist's version of the client ... the person in front of you is talking about themselves ... I've gone further and have even said to supervisees, 'Just think about the client and we'll tune in.' I also thought when I read the interview with him, well I just say the same thing in different language. What he's talking about is that difficulties in the therapy are always the problem of the countertransference of the therapist.

Emma: Hopefully, readers of this article and the book will be inspired to learn more about the model, and about their own inner worlds, as well as bringing curiosity and compassion to others in their worlds. Thank you, Robin, for being an inspiration and speaking with me today.

Robin: Thank you. And, if readers are interested in IFS, what should they do next?

Emma: I find one of the best ways to find out more is to have IFS therapy, to learn it from the inside. They can also find out more about the IFS training available by visiting the IFS UK website: <https://internalfamilyystemstraining.co.uk>

Biography



Robin Shohet is a pioneer of supervision. He co-wrote *In Love with Supervision* (2020) with Joan Shohet, which is a record of their 40-plus years of working together in this field. Co-author of four editions of *Supervision in the Helping Professions*, his edited works include *Passionate Supervision* and *Supervision as Transformation*. For details of his books, training in the seven-eyed model and more, see: <https://cstdlondon.co.uk>



Emma Redfern (BACP senior accredited psychotherapist and supervisor, certified IFS therapist and approved IFS clinical consultant) currently works online from Devon in the south-west of England. She is editor of a multi-author book, *Internal Family Systems Therapy: supervision and consultation*, due to be published in July 2022 by Routledge. Details of IFS supervision training can be found at: <https://emmaredferrn.co.uk>

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