

Turning attention inside

Emma E Redfern describes how internal family systems helped a client get curious about the part of her yearning for freedom

Marla* emailed saying she had heard of me and wanted to 'try' some internal family systems sessions. She shared very little but I was expecting a mature woman as she referred to having experienced many different therapies as a client. She contacted me despite the statement on my website that I'm not taking new referrals at present.

I specialise in internal family systems (IFS), a modality developed by Dr Richard Schwartz, which views the mind as multiple, composed of various sub-personalities or 'parts' and a core, undamaged 'self'.¹

IFS aims to heal these parts by fostering compassion and understanding rather than suppressing them, allowing them to release extreme roles and 'burdens' and live and work harmoniously under the guidance of the self.

As a psychotherapist and also a supervisor and writer I need to be realistic about what I can take on (hence the statement on my website), and my heart can sink when I get new client enquiries. However, when Marla's email arrived I got curious inwardly, which in

IFS terminology we call a 'u-turn' or 'you-turn', listening for reactions. You could think of it as hosting an internal meeting with my parts, where I begin with, 'OK, who has anything they want to communicate in response to this enquiry? Now's the time.' Here are some of my inner responses:

- We don't want to get stale
- When are we retiring again?
- The timing feels right; we've got some space
- We've more than enough work to do already
- What if she finds we don't do IFS well enough?
- What if the work feels like going through the motions?



- But what does 'try IFS' mean? It sounds like pressure to me.

A you-turn (you might use similar practices with different names – for example, focusing, interoception or reflexive practice) is an important practice in IFS for both clinicians and clients. It is the practice of turning attention inside while accessing a place of loving welcome and curiosity; to meet and build relationships with your parts. Once a therapist has relationships with their key parts it makes inner dialogue in session more straightforward. We're less likely to be hijacked for any length of time by a judgmental part, an inner critic or a fearful part if we have already built some trust between us. By 'us' I mean the part(s) and the me-who-isn't-a-part, which IFS terms 'self'. Turning inward may seem overly 'personal' but it is in the service of the clinical work and the therapeutic relationship. It enables IFS professionals to turn outwards from a spacious, curious and welcoming place.



Reactions like those above from my parts will not be uncommon among therapists. As IFS becomes increasingly prominent and popular (as well as controversial at times), the pressures felt by IFS professionals to ‘perform’ proliferate. It can be uncomfortable for parts, feeling like they’re being taken for a test drive like a new car, to see (rightly) if it is suitable or what was expected for the money. On the other hand I have been known to urge clients to ‘road test’ prospective IFS therapists and their application of IFS. It is standard in private practice to determine ‘fit’ between client and practitioner as early as possible in the unfolding relationship. Curiosity in the form of mutually assessing each other at the outset of a therapeutic relationship is valid, as explained below.

Mutual assessment sessions

Having spent time curiously listening inside, with the different inner voices feeling heard and understood, I asked them what they needed from me. There was a call for reassurance that I’ve got their backs and don’t want them to feel bad through taking on a client. Although under the BACP *Ethical Framework* we commit to ‘making clients our primary concern while we are working with them’, I remind parts that this does not equate to self-sacrifice and ignoring our own needs and self-care – it can be both/and not either/or. I also remind them that it’s not a foregone conclusion that I will take this client on: there is much to explore first, including what the client means by her enquiry and

what she wants from IFS therapy and our time together.

With new client enquiries, I respond to the initial email with an outline of my terms, including the days and hours I work, preferred length of session and fee scale, and ask them to let me know if they want to take it further. If yes I will then send a GDPR document for their signature and return, and we diarise an initial (paid) appointment to explore the possibility of proceeding.

Here is some dialogue from that first session with Marla:

Me: Hello, Marla, welcome. Thank you for returning the GDPR paperwork...

Marla: And I’ve already paid for the session.

Me: You have; I appreciate that. Do you have any questions to begin with, or something you want to tell me straight off?

Marla: No, you go first.

Me: Sure. Well, in addition to being interested in getting to know you and

‘A you-turn is the practice of turning attention inside while accessing a place of loving welcome and curiosity; to meet and build relationships with your parts’

hearing about how you've experienced therapy previously, it would be helpful if you could tell me what you are hoping for from IFS [pause]. Your initial email said you wanted to 'try IFS' – can you say more?

Marla: Is that a problem?

Me: No, not at all. It's just that I find it helpful to be curious about client expectations early in the relationship. It's not that you are the first person to make such an enquiry, which means different things to different people, or even different things to different parts. My parts and I don't want to presume we know what you mean by 'try IFS'.

Did you notice I used the phrase 'curious about'? My therapist parts were calmly doing what they do best and enjoy – exercising curiosity by asking questions to gain clinical information. This sets the tone of the relationship as gently enquiring and genuinely interested in the client in front of me *and* their parts. I was aware that I also had access to a critical mass of self-energy, and felt welcoming, open and 'curious towards' the client, which is also a form of clinical curiosity in the IFS model. My hope is that my self-energy acts as a tuning fork for the client's self-energy. Usually I don't explain these subtleties to the client, though feeling 'curious towards' features later once the IFS is underway.

Far from being a little taciturn or even defensive as the above dialogue might suggest, Marla was curious about how I might relate to her and respond to her request. I believe we both enjoyed our initial meeting, which was confirmed at our second meeting when I asked her how the previous one had been for her system.

Agreeing a therapeutic contract

By the end of the initial session, Marla had shared plenty about herself and her past therapy experiences. She was a widow with two grown-up children who currently needed her less, having flown the nest, and without showing signs of creating their own broods for 'Granny Ma' to enjoy caring for. After years in



therapy working through past traumatic experiences, constricting self-beliefs and thought patterns as well as the losses entailed in becoming widowed relatively young, she wanted to 'fly free'. Her vision was of living in the moment with a future of her choosing ahead of her – even if that meant she changed nothing. She wanted to live free from previous conditioning. We agreed to short-term IFS therapy, reviewing at six sessions with the possibility of extending to 10 sessions in total.

When I asked Marla, 'Why IFS?' she told me that a previous therapist was studying IFS and had a book on her desk with my name on it. 'I googled you and found a blog you'd written, something about "no ifs, ands or buts",' she said. 'I liked your straightforward style, and what you said about therapy as transformation not just countering things all the time.'

Marla had come across a blog I'd written for professionals about a process of unlearning called memory reconsolidation, which yields transformational, profound and

permanent change.^{2,3} Hearing her words, my body experienced a brief burst of panic, and a catastrophising voice shared their fear.

Part inside: What if we're not like she expects?

Me [internally]: Are we straightforward when meeting with clients or is it just a writing style thing do you think?

Part: Ah, of course; what was I thinking? [I sense the accompanying wry smile.]

Me [reassuring the part]: It's OK to be nervous when beginning with new clients. My sense is it's going to be extra important in this relationship that we are who we are rather than pretending to be what we're not.

Training in and working with IFS involves nurturing self-to-part relationships inside – it's not about reaching an imagined enlightened 'being in self' and transcending or getting rid of parts.

Curious connection

Using IFS I have learned to create relationships with and develop curiosity towards my inner sub-personalities or parts. Guiding Marla in this was an important aspect of her experiencing of the model.

The principles, practices and assumptions of IFS inform my therapeutic or clinical curiosity. In an early session I was guided by the IFS concept of 'constraint release', as shown by this dialogue:

Me: Marla, you said that you want to 'fly free'? [She nods.] What would you say if I asked who or what on the inside gets in the way of that?

Marla: Well, I just don't feel I've had much freedom in my life, and now the children are settled and I've worked through so much stuff, it feels time.

'Working with IFS involves nurturing self-to-part relationships inside – it's not about reaching an imagined enlightened "being in self" and transcending or getting rid of parts'

Me: Absolutely, so in IFS terms, there might be a part, or parts, wanting that?

Marla: I guess so but it feels so alien, putting what I want first and choosing just for me.

Me: Ah, and that makes sense too, Marla. It sounds like you have more than one part with different things to share on this subject. How would it be if we got curious about the different parts of you with a stake in this?

Marla agreed. Guided by the first three of the 'six Fs' of IFS – 'find the part'; 'focus on it'; 'flesh it out' – and using my collection of sand-tray objects, I invited Marla to map out the relevant parts, including those who may use therapy to 'talk about' other parts inside her, and other people outside the room. It then felt like time to facilitate Marla in the IFS you-turn whereby her curious self could meet with and get to know a part at a time.

Me: Marla, as you notice these parts laid out in front of you, which part are you drawn to first to get to know more?

Try not to think about it too much, see if you can let your open-hearted curiosity guide you.

Marla: That one [*she points to a purple-jewelled tree*] – the one who wants to be free to be herself.

Me: OK, so...

Marla: But every time I focus on that one, I'm distracted by the blue Madonna who is so invested in caring for everybody.

Me: Great noticing, Marla. It's possible these two have a relationship with each other. Is it OK to set up some space over here just for them? [*Marla does this and sighs, seemingly with relief as she places the two objects.*]

Me: Ah, lovely. Before we continue I'd like you to ask inside of all the parts represented over there [*gesturing to the larger group of objects*] if any one has concerns about you turning your attention to these two.

Marla [*after a silent pause*]: No, it feels right and almost like they're curious too.

Me: Ideal, parts can observe and contribute their own curiosity and open-heartedness if they wish from over

there. [*She nods gently. Meanwhile I share the same message inside with my parts and the reminder/request, 'Let me be curious?'*] Marla, how do you feel towards both parts? [*Using another F, the fourth, 'feel towards', which offers a yardstick to discern the presence of one or more of the eight Cs of self-energy, including curiosity.*]⁴

Marla: Well, I am genuinely curious [*it sounds like this feels novel for her*], not because a part of me has an agenda and wants to get something done. Just curious. [*She smiles.*]

Me: See if you can extend that open curiosity inside to your parts as depicted by these two objects.

Marla: I'm going to shut my eyes now.

Me: Sure.

Marla: It feels like they know I'm here. Or is it there? [*She asks herself.*]

The curiosity of self-energy has no agenda, merely an intention for healing. It has an emergent quality about it that I think of in terms of old-fashioned darkroom photography. I imagine us in a red-lit room in which paper swirls in fluid – we are there curiously, with hope and welcome as something gradually emerges on the paper to be known and engaged with. The IFS questions and steps of healing form a container, and partner with the healing curious presence of self in both the client's and therapist's system.

Completing (or not)

Over nine sessions Marla deepened her relationship with her two 'protector parts', who gave access to the more wounded and burdened part they protected. In IFS such a part is called an 'exile' because it is locked away out of everyday life and functioning by protectors. Such parts need self's presence (in therapist and client) to guide them through steps of healing before being integrated into the system in their now unburdened state. We were due a final session but Marla cancelled on the morning of our last appointment. Her email said she'd 'had a chat inside' and decided to book last-minute onto an organised trek in Canada. So far it

was glorious, the vistas huge, the sense of freedom and budding camaraderie in the group welcome. She knew I'd understand, was sorry she'd not emailed sooner, had made payment and, yes, she knew where I was for the future.

And my parts? A momentary twinge of jealousy as we conjured up visions of the trekking trail, followed by an appreciation of being unexpectedly gifted an hour – once I'd emailed back of course. When that settled I was left with a sense of a job well done. Marla had turned inwards and then outwards to the world in what seemed (from where I was sitting) a different and positive way. ●

**This is a composite example, and names and identifiable details have been changed. The author is aware that the above is not necessarily typical of IFS therapy; every therapy journey is unique in multiple ways.*

REFERENCES

1. Schwartz RC, Sweezy M. Internal family systems therapy (2nd ed). New York: The Guilford Press; 2020.
2. Redfern EE. Retraining in internal family systems: no ifs, ands or buts. PESI UK. pesi.co.uk/blogs/retraining-in-internal-family-systems-no-ifs-and
3. Ecker B, Ticic R, Hulley L. Unlocking the emotional brain: memory reconsolidation and the psychotherapy of transformational change. New York: Routledge; 2024.
4. Redfern EE, Shohet R. Self in internal family systems therapy. *Thresholds* 2022; 33(3): 26-29.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma E Redfern MBACP (Accred)

is a certified IFS therapist, approved clinical consultant and IFS supervisor. She is the author of *Transitioning to Internal Family Systems Therapy: a companion for therapists and practitioners*, and the editor of the only book on IFS supervision, *Internal Family Systems Therapy: supervision and consultation* (both Routledge). Her latest book, *Internal Family Systems: making a start (and getting curious about parts)*, is published by Sheldon Press.

