

PTSD and parts

Emma Redfern writes about post-traumatic growth within her inner system



My first home was made uninhabitable by an outside-in fire 30 years ago. I was inside it at the time and a fireman guided me down a ladder to safety. Understandably, this was a challenging experience. Within a few months, I became aware of the urge for my life to end so that the emotional pain would stop. Alongside that, there was another urge to get help so that life might continue as normal. Looking back, this was my first experience of inner multiplicity; I knew the first 'voice' was not all of me.

The fire 'tipped me' into PTSD, as I call it. Three years later, an insurance settlement resulted in some group therapy for PTSD sufferers, which began as an in-patient. For the first time, I experienced therapeutic and genuine curiosity from my assigned clinician. It was then I learned that for the sake of my future mental wellbeing, I too needed to get curious about myself. The past would need facing and I would need to make sense of it.

Parts in internal family systems (IFS)

Fast forward to today and I am now an IFS psychotherapy professional and author. That first therapy experience was life-changing and life-affirming. On marrying and moving to a new part of the world, I retrained as a humanistic integrative counsellor. That journey (and my husband's, who later trained as a drama therapist) led us to IFS.

It's normal to be plural; it's advantageous and challenging at the same time. Some parts (protectors) have roles inside, while also helping us to do our actual jobs in the outside world. Other parts (the protected, or exiles) bravely hold our painful experiences, which are usually memories from the past. We couldn't function without parts doing these things. IFS strongly suggests that it is helpful to think of and approach parts as people.

When I experience a strong reaction, if there's enough spacious welcome and curiosity inside, I can ask, 'Who said that?' or, like I did last night, 'Who's really angry about that?'. Generally, such a question gives the part who was blending, or feeling like all of me, space to be 'related to' rather than 'rant into the void', 'run the show' or 'drive my inner psychic bus'.

Self to part relationships

As well as IFS helping me (and thousands of others) become aware of our inner parts (and you can use whatever term

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you prefer for the plurality inside), IFS also helps us access our inner 'Self'. Self is the 'you-who's-not-a-part' and is able, ideally, to relate to, care about and heal (if necessary) parts who are up for that.

Although I was a practising Christian as a child and young person, my church-going days stopped about the same time as I took up psychotherapy training. I felt let down once too often by authority figures, unaware that their extreme parts were running their shows unsupported. Don't get me wrong, parts are not problems to be solved. It's not about getting rid of or 'rising above' parts but creating inner harmonious and intentional relationships between 'Self' (by whatever name you use) and the parts. Living as 'we' inside feels significant: reduced inner conflict, increased self-acceptance and creativity, more compassion outwards and sense of connectedness with all beings, for example.

IFS catalogues the 'Eight C's of Self': curiosity, calm, compassion, connectedness, creativity, clarity, confidence and courage. My system has shifted from being dominated by protectors trying to escape fear and shame to embracing more creativity. 'Self' helps parts to manage extreme thoughts and emotions as well as to release personal and legacy burdens. In my latest IFS book – written for everyone, not just mental health practitioners – I've enjoyed highlighting what 'Self' is (accepting, welcoming, open-hearted and loving, for example) and what 'Self' is not.

'Self' is not a concept you learn and merely pay lip service to. 'Self' energy needs to be experienced on the inside; it cannot be understood into existence. When therapists are Self-led, we welcome our own and others' vulnerability; 'Self' is not like a leader in a party-political sense. Accessing 'Self' inside is not about becoming a guru or extremely 'nice'. Being 'in Self' is a process and it's relational rather than an end-goal. Self is not acquired through ageing; it is accessed intentionally in different ways by different spiritual traditions and psychotherapeutic schools. IFS has its own methods, some of which can be used DIY-style, and some (like working with exiles), which are best facilitated by someone trained in the method. ●

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