

Befriending Self-like Parts with Mariel Pastor

Today on IFS Talks, we're welcoming back Mariel Pastor to speak with us about Self-like parts. Mariel is a lead trainer based in Portland, Oregon, who began her IFS journey back in 1998 with Richard Schwartz. She now trains students worldwide and is a co-founder of the IFS Tele-health Collective, a multi-state group practice of licensed and trained IFS Therapists. Mariel recently wrote and edited the new level one Training Manual. Prior to becoming a psychotherapist, she worked in the entertainment industry in Hollywood. Her love of working with artists has inspired her most recent project called character mapping, a psychological toolbox for actors, writers, and directors to build deeper characters and to help them find themselves.

Tisha Shull: Mariel, welcome back to IFS Talks. And thank you so much for joining us again today.

Mariel Pastor: Very happy to be with you both. Thank you for inviting me.

Anibal Henriques: Welcome back, Mariel, and thanks much for another talk. This one focused on Self-like parts, how to distinguish them from Self-energy and how to befriend them. Mariel, in IFS literature there is not a lot written about Self-like parts and the term only in relatively recent readings appears. We can find it in more recent readings from Dick Schwartz, like a 2013 article and Pam Krause also names the role of Self-like parts as occasional obstacles to unblending in her chapter, *Getting Unstuck* in 2017 book *Innovations*. If I may, I would like to start off with a quote in this Dick's 2020 IFS second edition that goes like this: "Probably the most common phenomenon that baffles beginners is the Self-like part, a manager who can appear to be the Self and often looks like the person at his current age, but whose caretaking and kindness, nevertheless includes an agenda and keeping exiles out of mind." So, Mariel, what is a Self-like part?

Mariel: Well, I think that is a great description of a kind of Self-like part that I've encountered. But one way I kind of define them is, as Dick's book was saying, they do have an agenda, but sometimes the roles are not only as managers and maybe we'll get into that, but I like to distinguish Self-like parts from Self-filled parts. So often, you know, all of our parts have some Self in them, as we know. You know how much I love the unburden system and when parts are feeling in their preferred roles, they have a lot of Self qualities. So, we don't get rid of parts. So, sometimes our parts are around and they're lending their Self to our lives and also to the process. And those are fine to have around. I like to say that we know that parts can help other parts cope, but parts don't help other parts deeply heal. I mean, it can be helpful and a little bit healing, but Self-like parts in therapy for the IFS therapist will be a challenge to unblend as Pam was saying, because they have an agenda and you can kind of tell when they're up, something isn't flowing, something feels off, something stops, and it's not the same as real Self-energy, that's more collaborative, that has a different kind of wisdom. I actually think there's a number of different ways that Self-like parts show up, in addition to the kind of caring Self-like part that Dick's book mentions.

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Tisha: Are there ways that you have to distinguish Self-like parts from Self-filled parts? Is it more of just a felt sense of knowing your system, knowing the client's system? Or are there distinct tips for identifying to begin with?

Mariel: Yeah. Like some clues that they're there? Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned something about the body. It is a feel, you know, we talk about Self-energy and I think there's parts energy too. And then there's burdened parts energy, all those are kind of different. And the more we do this work, the more you get the feel of it. And the body's really important. So, for me, Self-like parts will maybe have a little urgency, or they might be trying, they might be efforting, working at it, maybe a little too much. Like you just get this feel of some pushing perhaps or pushing past, but then there are other ones and we're kind of getting into where I see them, not just in a manager role. I think they can also be in a firefighter or exile role and, or exiles aren't quite a role, but in that kind of position, but sometimes they can be a little numbing. So, I suppose I should confess, like everybody else, I have my own Self-like parts that I do really befriend or have befriended, but one that came to light. I actually want to refer to Loch Kelly's work. He's an IFS therapist and a meditation expert and he teaches a lot. He talks about a kind of witness state that can feel like Self-energy, but he calls it the witness protection program, which is a play on words in the United States when somebody is helping the FBI, they go into witness protection, but he means that it's a kind of witnessing energy that's still a little protective because it's still may feel a little impersonal. So, for me, if I sense that part of me in my own process, in my own inner work, it helps when I'm guided to feel into my heart more and feel more warmth, then it's less impersonal like a witness might be.

Tisha: So that witness would come up as you're being with the exile and you'd sense... Hmm. There's not that real true sense of connection, but we are seeing what the exiles experienced.

Mariel: Right. It could be that in working with an exile, but when we build a Self to part relationship, it could be with a manager or a firefighter when the Self is wanting to connect. So those different Self qualities, connection, clarity, competence, courage, et cetera, are great. And it's like Self-energy fills out, it expands, and it deepens. So, my witness may be a lot more helpful than a critic who's dealing with some other part, you know, but the personal energy or the warmth of Self-energy is more connecting in that Self to part relationship, especially with exiles. Exiles really want that warmth and that connection. Some managers are really glad to have the clarity of Self-energy or the confidence, a lot of protectors want to feel that. And I think in general, the body will feel more present and engaged when we're in Self-energy with any kind of part.

Anibal: Mariel, Dick says that these pseudo Selves or Self-like parts are extremely difficult for us to detect. Is it really useful to identify and recognize or name Self-like parts? And if yes, why is it so important to identify them?

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Mariel: Right. I think when it's important too, is when you realize something isn't flowing, and there can be other reasons for that, like other parts are objecting to the work that haven't been checked with yet. But if Self really isn't enough in the lead, like we talk about how much Self, right? Sometimes it doesn't have to be a hundred percent in Self out of Self. There needs to be enough of that presence, like, you know, grease in the gears to get it moving. But when it's not moving and everything else looks pretty good, like, huh, I'm not sure what's happening. Some of these Self-like parts can be very kind of clever and committed to controlling the process. And they will have reasons... They don't like to be called out. In fact, I think it's very important for the IFS practitioner to really not be afraid of them, not be too alarmed, but to be very curious when something feels off and to gently inquire, use curiosity, "is there a part that's maybe working a little hard or is there something else happening here that feels closed off?" If you've met from a client before a pleaser or a caretaker part, which is kind of the one that was mentioned in Dick's book, you could ask, "oh, I wonder if that caretaker might be working again right now, is it here?" And don't make it this big, horrible ordeal. It's not like, you know, everything's lost just because a Self-like part is there, but some trust might need to be built with that one, that it can be safe for it to rest, or you might need to work with it a bit and find a new way to collaborate with it so that it's not in the lead. The problem is when it's really in the lead because they can carry and hold some good information about the system. I also don't like to call them Self-like parts. I have to say.

Anibal: The Self-filled?

Mariel: Well, I like them to name themselves. I don't like to name, call parts. I let parts name themselves, but that's sort of a handle we use in the trainings, you know, as therapists, is that we're saying that there's something other than enough genuine Self-energy in the lead here. So, and then we say they're Self-like, it seems like it's Self, but something's not quite right. Sometimes they are very caring. Sometimes they're smart and have a lot of clarity, but they're still not very accepting, let's say, or there's something that's still not quite as open, like beginner's mind as Self-energy would be.

Anibal: Yeah. Dick says it is important to remember that the agenda of a Self-like part is no less than any other manager to control other parts. Would you agree with his?

Mariel: Yeah. And then they have different ways of doing that, right? So, either by being... Sometimes there'll be... Have you ever seen this where there's an exile, a child part... You know, parts, aren't their roles, but let's say there's a tender kid who's a little distrusting as soon as they're encountered, even distrusting of Self-energy. And if the person wants to quick give this child a hug, which seems loving, what if that kid doesn't want to hug? What if that child needs more patience and time to be met? And it has to build trust? To me, that can be a Self-like part. I will ask. And there's ways to deal with it. Like, well, let's ask the kid if that's what they would like. So, they can be helpers, control, maybe mild control or really controlling. Right. So, I kind of look at these things as degrees of energy or potency.

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Tisha: You mentioned using the body and different types of energy to kind of track these parts. Are there typical parts that you notice in yourself or that other therapists have when Self-like parts are present? Is there anything that kind of trips your system to ask the question? Oh, is this a Self-like part? And versus a Self-filled...

Mariel: In the body for me, I will say that, you know, in starting a session, there will be conversation. I hope the conversation is not too in our head trying to figure things out. Like, I think the word stress and strain is a good barometer for me. How much am I efforting or working? So, at the beginning of a session, you know, we might be kind of getting a sense of what we want to focus on. So, there's some conversation maybe with a manager, that's fine. They can come in with goals. They're not necessarily super stressed, but the deeper we go in the flow of the model, I feel like the more my body feels like it's literally warm, not like overheating, but I think I feel grounded, warm, very much connected to the client. And I'm not even so much aware of the thinking, but following... My parts, sort of feel like they're in the background with maybe an idea, but I'll float it out and it feels maybe gentler and at ease. There are other times if I need to lend a little more strength for clients' parts, because that's what they're wanting. I don't know. It's subtle, it's hard to describe. And I certainly can't describe it for other therapists, but that's what it's like for me.

Tisha: It feels like it came across to me. I appreciate your description. Yeah.

Anibal: Mariel, as for distinguishing Self from Self-like parts, Dick has various suggestions. I'm quoting some. He says, "if the client does observe an image of herself interacting with other parts, this is a Self-like part." He also asks, "are you with your parts directly or do you see yourself with them?" How do you like to comment on this?

Mariel: I love that. That's true. And that's sort of like the witnessing thing too, for me. Like, if I see myself with the part, I will say, not everybody sees their parts in the same way, or is as visual, but many people are... One thing I will say to clients around that is if they're confused by that question, like, what do you mean if I see myself there and like, oh, is that wrong? It's really possible for clients who are wanting to have a successful or a good experience, a healing experience, to feel like they're doing something wrong if we asked that, so I'll just offer, "well, it's like right now, I'm just with you. I don't see myself with you." And then they get it. "Oh, okay. I can be there." But that's true. What Dick's saying is like, it's a little removed and so we can be curious, "is there a part that has concerns about letting you be really present with this other one?"

Tisha: Do the Self-like parts have common fears or are they the same fears that other protectors have?

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Mariel: Well, I liked that you phrased it that way because many Self-like parts are protectors. And if I may, I think I'd like to talk a little bit about some Self-like parts or when we think Self is in the lead, but it's really a part and it's a firefighter. So, have you ever had an experience where you're working with something tender, something that hasn't been allowed or has been rejected and exiled and you get close and all of a sudden everything's fine? Everything's great. I live on the west coast in the United States. So, I say it's sort of like, you know, the groovy parts, everything's hippie. Sort of like, oh, peace, love and happiness, we're all good here. To me that's like a firefighter that's doing what we call a spiritual bypass.

Tisha: Yeah. I was going to ask if that's the spiritual bypass that you defined. Yeah.

Mariel: It feels like that to me. And they will provide a really lovely feeling inside, you know, very positive, but it's out of fear that whatever is there, we can't handle it, or they'll have whatever common protector fears. Now I'm not going to put down that sort of feeling in the body. You know, it is nice to have positive thoughts and maybe even go towards spiritual energy inside. It feels good for the nervous system. And I think firefighters like to change the feeling state as quickly as possible. And in this case, they're going to something really positive and can be healthy for us, except for it's still an avoidance. It's still avoiding something else or just quickly distracting us. And in which case there's some fear underneath it. And some competence and trust needs to be built and hope that we can deal with the thing they fear and actually heal it so that they don't even have to escape it anymore.

Anibal: Can those types of Self-like parts lead clients into a spiritual path?

Mariel: Well, sure. I think especially when there has been more healing and unburdening done, you know, it's nice to know what that feels like in the body to get into that kind of state. Yeah. And, then it'll be like, so I think sometimes firefighters, when they're unburdened, they'll remind us to take some time off, they'll remind us to pursue other pleasures or interests. And for those who really want to develop more of a spiritual path, it's, you know, at that point, just more of their... And managers might like that too. Health oriented, goal-oriented managers might partner with some former firefighters and go yeah, let's go to a retreat. Let's forget about the world's problems for a day or for a weekend and let's go enjoy some of this. It's just that we'll come back to whatever the issues where the problems were later and more refreshed.

Anibal: Mariel, coming back to what signs can we find that a Self-like part may be active, and I'd like to quote Dick again on this, and also the manual that you edited. Dick says, lack of progress in therapy, despite apparent Self-energy in the client can be a clue that a Self-like part is running the inner show and also exiles refusing to interact with or be comforted by the Self's presence.

Mariel: Yeah, absolutely. So, when something's off, it's not flowing and Dick's talking about that or the exile doesn't want to build trust with Self, or I sometimes think other protectors

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come in and go, this isn't real. I don't buy it. And the other protectors of the exiles don't want to allow the connection. Because again, it's complicated in people. So, there's many different ways this might show up.

Anibal: The manual that you edited, the official manual for the level one it says, when burdens come back, Self wasn't leading the process. Do you want to comment on this?

Mariel: There're different reasons why it might seem like a burden isn't resolved. And that's one of the reasons is that, well, it wasn't actually Self-energy doing the healing. So, again, I think parts can help other parts cope or get along, but parts can't help. Can't actually heal the deeper burdens. It's not like Self-energy can, or enough Self-energy there. Other parts might support the healing, but it's not the same. I'd like to add if I can, because people are always surprised when I say, what do you mean an exile Self-like part. So, can either of you take, you know, you want to take a guess?

Tisha: An exile Self-like part?

Anibal: Someone that pretends to be in pain?

Mariel: Yeah. So, well, I guess how I have seen it, because it's not as common. I think, again, the most common Self-like parts are the ones that are controlling the therapy or controlling other parts inside like those managers, but an exile can be mistaken as Self-energy, in my opinion, when a client gets in touch with that young open, innocent energy inside, it may not necessarily seem young, but it's open, creative, innocent energy. And is just so refreshing to have that back in the fold, to have that included again. And occasionally you'll find somebody who believes, oh, the child is who we are down deep. The child should be free, and the child should be in the lead. And this energy is so unencumbered in free child that that's who I really am inside. And so, there are some philosophies I've heard that believe that the free child, that unencumbered child energy is like our own personal imprint of our Self. It's very close to Self-energy, but it's not the same as the wise deeply intuitive Self, if that makes sense. So just because it's in us from the beginning, that child isn't actually going to be the wisest leader of the system, but it sure is important. And it sure does have a lot of Self qualities in it.

Tisha: I was wondering if this is another example, because this has happened on more than one occasion where someone will meet with an exile and the exile will turn and start care-taking the adult.

Mariel: Yes. I mean, that's a loving quality for a child. You know, kids want to connect and attach. What's challenging is if that child is doing it because that's the only way they'll get their needs met and they have to almost earn or perform in that way. Whereas a child really should, you know, get attention simply because it exists, it's there. But I have seen that too. And, so we love that quality, but it's not the same as Self-energy.

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Anibal: Mariel, so, what are Self-like parts common fears? What are their fears? And how do we befriend them?

Mariel: Right. Well, some that I found fear that if they're not doing what they do, leading the therapy, directing things, controlling other parts or helping in that way, they don't think anything's going to happen in this process. It's like, oh, it's sort of, you know, I'll get this going. They don't necessarily trust the other parts to have their own healing rhythm, which is a way I phrase it to the Self-like parts. We say we want to let them speak for themselves, that every part has its own healing rhythm. And they'll say, oh no, they don't. I know what's good for them. So, they're usually afraid that nothing's going to happen without them there. There won't be a change. They fear that there isn't Self-energy because they've been in charge for so long and they've done helpful things for the person. Sometimes they just are so used to doing the job. Like, I remember hearing inside of me once, a part said, "this is the thanks I get for everything I've done for you? You want me to step back?" It really needed some appreciation for being so helpful. And I think that's one of the main things around befriending them is recognizing their dedication, their positive intentions, like any other part, and they can help, but they can't heal. So there really is that distinction. I think another common fear is they really don't believe the person can handle whatever it is inside. They fear other part's taking over. And that sort of like, you know, how we use that metaphor of the orchestra in IFS where the parts are the instruments and Self is the conductor. And of course, the Self, the conductor needs the instruments to play music. But when the conductor isn't there, the first violin is in charge of running rehearsals and in charge of the music. So those Self-like parts might be like the first violins. They think "without me, there's no one else to do this," because the Self has been really also hidden or not allowed because of circumstances.

Tisha: You've trained so many new IFS therapists and there's so much emphasis on being in Self as an IFS therapist. And I'm curious what your experience shows about that dance, that people that are new to learning the model do with Self versus Self-like parts.

Mariel: Yeah. I'm so glad you brought that up because I was thinking about that very thing. When we start introducing the term or as it comes up, Self-like parts in a training, I think it sets off some alarms in the therapists, like, "oh no, I'm supposed to always be in Self, a hundred percent Self all the time." And the irony can be that then their own Self-like parts are a little bit performing. So, the fear of Self-like parts might actually bring up some of those in the therapist, even though they don't want to. In fact, a colleague of mine in Australia last week in a consultation group had said that there's a critic in her that had become the Self-like part policeman or police officer. It was on the lookout to arrest any part that was like a Self-like part. It's just starts to be this cascading effect.

Anibal: Can be scary.

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Mariel: But don't be afraid of it. That's why I like to, in my workshops, I have a little Self-like part inventory that I lead with. So, I'll just say a little bit about it here, if that's okay.

Anibal: Please, yes.

Mariel: You know, it's really important for us to consider what comes up when we hear that term, what we've been told we should do, which is a watch out for them, what impulses come up and what we've seen, like get a sense of what do we even mean by Self-like parts and then be gentle and ask, what do I sense in myself around that? Do I have any? Because at the end of the day, all of these parts are pretty universal across people, very human. So, if we can find it in ourselves in a welcoming way, no shame, no blame, this is a shame-free zone, and get to know them and really with that reassurance, I'm not here to get rid of them, but finding it in ourselves as part of an inventory and developing that relationship so that they can be helpful, but not as quickly in the lead and feeling the energy of them in the body when they're strong, when they're moderate or when they're really relaxed

Anibal: And Mariel, does Self has no agenda at all?

Mariel: Well, we used to say that a lot in the trainings and then it got clarified, I think by Dick, at some point and I really appreciated this, while Self doesn't have agenda, it does have a sense of purpose. And that purpose is to unify the parts, to reconnect, to bring balance and wholeness. And that means also to help heal, to help foster the transformation. So, I think Self wants to have a full house, have everybody home.

Anibal: So Self-like parts are welcome. Are therapists allowed to have Self-like parts?

Mariel: Oh, well, yes, but it's because they're already there and you know, our managers or Self-like parts, they're not always extreme, right? So, they might be helpful. I have had times in the past where... I remember there was a time where I had a lot of grief in my life and I'd come to work and there were some clients whose Self-energy was more readily available in the process. And as their Self-energy came through more of minded because it's a relational field between two people in IFS therapy. It's, you know, a dynamic. So, who was there before with me that was helping them get to that point? Was it a manager or Self-like part? I don't know, but it wasn't interrupting. It wasn't interfering. It was still allowing the process. So, all of us have parts. That's part of our ego and our personality. It might feel balanced. It may not feel so burdened, just like there can be clouds in the sky, those are our parts, sun can still come through. It doesn't have to be a completely cloudless sky for that energy to come through.

Anibal: So, Mariel, thank you so much for having us again. It was a joy to be here with you and Tisha, and we hope we can keep meeting and sharing this model, our works and our lives. And how is your IFS Health Collective doing?

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Mariel: Well like IFS. I mean, the attraction to the model is really strong. So, we're very lucky to say that we've got a great collection of therapists. We're almost at 25 clinicians in the six states where we are, and we expect to be growing this year, growing sanely to not just to meet the demand, there's so much demand right now for therapy, but specially for IFS, but it's going really well. And it's really feeling like a home for the clinicians, which is great, given how much isolation there's been. And plus, we're spread across the country. So, it's been really helpful. I've loved having this new community to turn to.

Tisha: Thanks for sharing your wisdom again, it's always wonderful to be with you.

Mariel: Thanks to you as well.