

Common Pitfalls in IFS Language, with Mariel Pastor

Today on IFS talks we're so happy to be welcoming back Mariel Pastor. Mariel Pastor is an IFS lead trainer based in Portland, Oregon. She wrote and edited the new *IFS Level One Training Manual*, and she's created advanced workshops designed around the *Unburdened Internal System Mandala*. More recently, she's the co-founder of the IFS Telehealth collective, a multi-state group practice that brings IFS therapy online to clients while supporting the clinicians who serve them. Today we're speaking with Mariel about IFS shorthand busters, exploring some of the prominent accidental habits of the IFS therapist that can be challenging for clients.

Tisha Shull: Mariel, thank you so much for joining us again today. We're really looking forward to this conversation

Mariel Pastor: As am I and thank you both. It's fun to be with you.

Aníbal Pastor: Welcome back Mariel. Two years ago, in February 2020, right before the pandemic, we sat together, and we talked. We addressed your personal journey with IFS, your beautiful diagram The Unburdened Systems Mandala. And we also analyzed the brand-new level one training manual, once you were the main writer and editor. We spent a great time together today. Today, you want to speak for some common accidental misunderstandings about IFS model that you say really confuses therapists and frustrate client's parts. And you say these come up consistently in your consultation groups. You say you call them IFS shorthand busters and they have been a part of your Unburden System Workshops. You say some of the language we use is really just shorthand and the complete meaning is often lost. So, Mariel, do you want to share with us what are those common accidental misunderstandings that confuse therapists and clients and become prominent habits? Let's just sit with the first common misunderstandings in your list and debunk it: *Self is good, and parts are bad*. So, isn't it true? Self is good, parts are bad, or can parts be as good as Self?

Mariel: Well, this is a good opening for a plug for Richard Schwartz's latest book, which there are no bad parts, right? *No Bad Parts* I think is the title. That kind of language good and bad, you know, just invites exceptions to the rule. And what I like to remember is the basic assumptions of the IFS model are really all we need to lean on when we want to understand it. And one of the first assumptions is that multiplicity or having any number of parts is natural and it's useful and it's human. So, we all have these different aspects of our personality, many layers inside, and we have Self-energy. So, this is just the lay of the land of being human. It's natural, it's universal. So how can it be bad to have parts? It's some of how we're built. I do want to say that I've always been a little nervous presenting some of these accidental misunderstandings because I think everybody comes to them innocently and with good intentions, you know, we, the model is complex, people are complex and this process is also somewhat intuitive and elegant. So, when you witness IFS, you see this, oh, it makes so much sense and we put language to it to summarize or put a little structure around this abstract process in a way or on the inside so that this language can be efficient and sometimes too short. The caveat is the disclaimer is everyone who might use some of these different misunderstandings as we're going to call them these shorthand busters, comes to it innocently. Nobody is really intending to confuse clients or irritate them. And I think in the trainings or in all the different IFS offerings in the world, online books, et cetera, you see this elegant process, you know, but people are complex, and the model is complex, which is why we have the trainings.

So, we use these sorts of terms, as shorthand, as structure to understand this complex model. And sometimes people have heard some of these terms or sayings as I'm calling them shorthand so often that they may have not spent enough time really feeling into all of what they're about, what these terms are about it. It accidentally got lost. So, in consultation, I'm noticing these habits and I'm wanting to shed light on it. And it seems to clarify things for therapists. So that's my intention.

Anibal: Makes sense, yes.

Tisha: Can you share with us a little bit more about how you developed these before we get into the next one? What you were noticing in consultation and how you began to iron out these habits?

Mariel: Yes, yes. One piece is that while we all know that the healing comes from Self-energy and the more acceptance and compassion and curiosity, all those great aspects of what it feels like to be listening deeply to a part, we all know that's where the deepest healing is going to go. And sometimes people are wanting to get past parts really quickly. And that if a part is blended, it seems like that's a problem. So even though we say multiplicity is natural, all parts are welcome, we're asking them to step back all the time. So, a part of me often says, if I'm welcome, exactly, when is that? Why am I being asked to step back constantly? When am I welcome and why would I be welcome? Isn't that a good thing? So, I would see it in practice when people might be asking a part to step back because they can tell it's there, they could feel its energy. And I like to say that when we talk about a parts detector in IFS...

Anibal: So important.

Mariel: ...that's one of the, a term that we use. That's something that you get better at. I believe what we're really detecting is the burden or some edginess of a part when it's problematic, right. Burden energy. But if we ask it part to step back, sometimes we don't even know who that was or what it was really about and how it also is just as important as part of this person. So sometimes it might have been done without really understanding the value of that part or who that part actually even was. So that was one of the first places I saw it. Sometimes it sounds like, you know, like you hear people in trainings perhaps, in IFS communities, using this shorthand saying things like, oh, well that was just a part.

Anibal: Diminishing the part, right?

Mariel: Yeah. It's accidentally minimizing or dismissive. Oh, that was just a part of somebody or that's just a part talking, what part of you is that... As if, and it's not always, when it's not just the words, it's sort of the assumption behind it.

Tisha: Right. There is almost a tone there, there's like some implicit, like you should get that part to unblend and be with me in Self.

Mariel: Right. And, good luck by the way, because I don't think we're always, we're ever going to be a hundred percent unblended unless we're perhaps in a really transcendent, deep meditative place. If I may, I know Pam Krause talked about the weaponization of Self and this fits in there with that, as well as with Cece Sykes, she has this spectrum of Self-energy that is in the manual. And the idea is that there's, you know, amounts or degrees of Self-energy. It's hard to put language to that because it's so subjective and energetic, but I just want to add another piece, I think of, comes from transpersonal psychology that talks

about real Self, which might be that transcendent, non-dual, very spiritual, you know, expansive energy of Self that includes and connects everything. Okay. I'm not living in that as often as I wish I were, but also besides real Self there's actual Self, which means the Self that we are, that's acting out in the world, acting in the world, engaging. And that might be as what Pam was talking about with it, when we're Self-led and we have our parts and our parts aren't problematic, they are blended and effective, right? And influential and helping in being human. And then last piece is false Self, which might be when we're much more burdened and we're so believing that who we are is that burden or all these burdens. So, to me, it's not Self as good and parts are bad. All of it is good, but it begs the question: where's the problem? You know, why are we asking them to step back? The problem is the burdens and the polarizations.

Aníbal: Mariel, you also say another common misunderstanding is *Parts are Feelings*. So, are parts more than just feelings?

Mariel: Yeah. That one really can activate a part of me. And people come by this innocently because we hear the sad part, the angry part. That's what we say in IFS is a trailhead. It's the beginning of getting to know a part. So maybe I'll say a trailhead is like, when you are on a walk in a forest at a trail, you're at the beginning, when you keep walking down that trail, you see a whole big vista, you get a whole journey, a whole experience. So, when a part is angry and we say the angry part, I may not know the full story of its anger. And besides angry, it might feel, you know, sad. This part might also not need to feel sad and angry once it's really listened to. It starts to change, and it tells you its intention. So, parts have feelings. The parts are not in itself just feelings. Another example of where this can be a problem is, I think about, Aníbal and Tisha, do you have different kinds of anger and might that come from different parts of you?

Tisha: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. There're different flavors of anxiety, different flavors of anger, different flavors of sadness. For sure.

Mariel: Can you imagine a part that's in a manager role having some of these emotions?

Tisha: Oh, for sure. Yeah.

Mariel: We're all smiling and going oh yes. So how a manager who's wanting to be in control and responsible feels angry is really different from a fighter in me, who's going to advocate for injustice around injustice and is really different from an exile in me who's so angry at always being ignored.

Aníbal: Angry is not coming from managers or firefighters always.

Mariel: But they're all angry. Yeah.

Aníbal: Exactly.

Mariel: Yeah. So, you know, a remedy to that is stay curious enough, you know, use that parts detector to know that some edge or burden energy is coming up, but be curious enough to know who's speaking in that person and what's the quality, what else is there about that side of the person, that part of that person. Parts are full person, they're three dimensional personalities. They have thoughts, they have wide variety of thoughts and feelings and sensations.

Tisha: Would this be a good time to ask you a little bit more about the burdens? Because this is, you know, in each of these, just these first two shorthand busters, there's the burdens are being acknowledged and you named initially that the parts aren't the challenges in and of themselves, but these burdens kind of pushing through. Could you say a little bit more about the nature of the burdens and how to work with that?

Mariel: Yeah. I'm glad you brought that up because that's also something that, you know, gets revisited a lot from, you know, IFS therapists. And I will say that because it's complex, none of these questions are ever old. They're always important. You get new angles on it. So, it's one reason I like teaching a level one and doing consulting. It's never boring for me. And I've been doing this 23 years or so. So, burdens are what constrains and keeps us from feeling let's say our most alive or free or thriving and burdens can be seen as energy that, you know, holds a part back. I mean, people often talk about, I feel like some burden was lifted when I tell my story and I feel lighter. So, in IFS, we look at burdens as negative beliefs that a part might take in from a number of sources, from family, from culture in ways that a person might remember or not, it just was felt it was in the environment, beliefs about themselves. I often say that burdens are beliefs that we act as if we're true, and then they are... So, an example is I'm worthless. I'm not okay, I'm all alone, I can't handle it, It's too much for me. Things like that. Another burden, a way a burden shows up is the emotional impact, because just a thought without the nervous system, through the emotion and the sensations being activated, isn't really a problem. You know, I can have a thought like I'm six foot 10, and it's not a problem because A it's not true. There's no any energy around it as being a bad thing. That was maybe a lousy example. But the burdens are thoughts, beliefs, sometimes memories, images that are problematic, but often it's felt in the body, sensations and emotions. So how they get presented in the IFS model might be all of those things or just a few ways that a part says the impact of a situation landed in them. What did they believe? So, like I said, it's complex.

Tisha: So, when you are sitting with an angry part and there's some kind of burden energy to it, there might be the thought "nobody loves me" at the basis of it. And so, then the angry part has a different flavor characteristics.

Mariel: Yeah. It starts to become much more nuanced in a way. And a story unfolds, and you see the context and even the anger might then soften, and you get to some sadness perhaps, or powerlessness. And maybe that leads into some other part that really holds the worst of it all. We don't know, we stay curious and we ask the person where that's coming from, or what else is important for me to know about your anger.

Anibal: Mariel, and what about your number three common misunderstanding *Parts are their roles*, can you say more on this one?

Mariel: Well, it's similar to the parts aren't their feelings, parts have feelings and they have any number of them. Parts also have roles, they aren't their roles. So sometimes people will come in and say, that was my manager. And you know, again, that's shorthand, I'll be curious, which manager. I don't know about you, but I have a number of them. So, and also some of our parts might do this role sometimes. Sometimes a protector might act as a manager or act as a firefighter. And what is sometimes forgotten is how we, or how Dick came to that understanding about the difference between managers and firefighters. And it comes from, in some ways the timing or the intention of managers is to be preventative of pain and vulnerability. They're out in front. They say never again. Right? They want to prevent problems. So often

managers are kind of the parts of us that are very socialized, who we will put out there and that's not necessarily a problematic thing. Right?

Anibal: Of course.

Mariel: But in therapy, people are wanting to look at their managers as problematic, maybe they're overworking, right? So, a part in its protective role to prevent problems might really overdo it and bring a lot of strain. And when it's relaxed or healing has happened and they don't have to be extreme, maybe they aren't in that role at all. So, if managers are preemptive and preventing problems, the firefighters are different. They react once the vulnerability comes up. So, my hardworking, let's say another part of me says, are you hardworking? Yes. Okay. Let's say a worker part of me that stays busy might do that to prevent problems and to make sure things go smoothly and under control, or it could do that because I'm nervous about something and I want to distract from feeling insecure. So, it might look really good and I'm being really busy, but it's in kind of firefighter mode. Do you experience it that way?

Tisha: I feel like it's different for every part in every context.

Mariel: It's true. My husband likes to say that some of his parts are specialists, so they consistently show up in one way. And I find that that's, you know, true for many people also, but some parts are more often managers, but so any behavior could be a manager or a firefighter. And sometimes there's a temptation to label all numbing, let's say, as a behavior, as always a firefighter. Not necessarily if somebody is living life all the time as I need to always stay numb, then that would be kind of a manager behavior manager role.

Anibal: And what about the number four common misunderstanding you refer *IFS is all about Insight or mostly Insight*. Is it so common, this misunderstanding and where does it come from?

Mariel: Right. Well, yeah, so IFS equals insight is something that I like to look at and challenge in that there really are three approaches to IFS and insight is the one that is deeply personal, really powerful. And what I think IFS is most known for because when Dick was really bringing it forward to the world at that time, there wasn't as much mindfulness happening in psychotherapy like it is now. There were other parts approaches, but this deep IFS, Self to Part relationship especially was just profound. It is profound. So, you see a lot of examples of that in trainings and demos and direct access, which is what we say is a part is really invited to blend, or we just know it's blended and we haven't specifically invited it, that's also very powerful as an IFS approach and can happen as part or all of a session, even. So, insight might be the most familiar and most prevalent IFS approach, but direct access is very important and there are different reasons to use that. And then the third approach to IFS, which is also very powerful, is to externalize the inner world through art or mapping, what we call sculpts. So, using objects to represent what's happening inside externally. That's also another really useful approach to understanding the inner system and helping it heal.

Anibal: Absolutely.

Tisha: On that note, do you have any recommendations for externalizing the system in sessions online? Because I felt like it was really great working with clients and doing parts mapping and even embodying

parts. But online, I find that that step of externalizing the system gets a little bit lost or like it becomes homework.

Mariel: Yeah.

Tisha: Do you have any shorthand for that?

Mariel: Yeah. That's a really question of the moment, isn't it? As all of us now are online and in my office, I had a sand tray and I had all these art tools. Well, I'm not in my office anymore or very often. So, yes, there are some things people are using. They might have a client grab an object in their room and say, let's let that represent, you know, this part of you, maybe for a polarization and let's grab another object. And so, the client can have some things in front of them. You can set it up in advance to have the client, it depends on what the client likes, if they have artistic, you know, if they have some tools like markers or paints nearby and some paper, you can guide them through a mapping technique. So, they're actually doing it with you. I think if you're using zoom, there's something called a whiteboard.

Anibal: Yeah. Can be helpful.

Mariel: And I believe there are some sand tray online resources that you can subscribe to. And I haven't used them, but I have heard some other clinicians that have made use of that. So, I think more will also be developed.

Anibal: Beautiful. Mariel, what about the number five common misunderstanding *Self is all you need*. What do you want to stress out with this one? One, Self is not enough?

Mariel: Yes. I remember a client who I have worked with for many years, and she is very familiar with using IFS and doing inner work. And several years ago, I remember her saying something along the lines of, I know I'm supposed to be able to do this all for myself and meaning the inner work. And I don't remember all of the context, but it kind of broke my heart a little bit in that, you know, in terms of attachment and connection and attachment, being a deep human need, universally, you know, we are relational beings. We cannot survive without each other. And yes, our own Self-energy can heal and reach certain places inside us in a way that another person really can't be as directly connected, but we can, at the same time, we need other people. And there are times when, let's say in great pain, if a person is in deep grief and very, very blended with their burdens and when there's deep grief, there's nothing wrong with the person for grieving, they are feeling a very natural, universal experience. Somebody else's Self-energy is incredibly helpful and important. So often in therapy and in IFS trainings, we do talk about it. I certainly do a lot throughout the training, the container we set as facilitators with our clients, holding our own Self-energy is no small thing. Is very important for others. And then not just in therapy out in the world. So, we need community. We need other people's health. I remember hearing with PTSD that in times of trauma, when that trauma has happened, if there has been enough Self-energy around the person in their community or family and offering that to the person who was traumatized, they're less likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder. They were met at the time with the resources that were healing from other people. So, this idea that we should be able to do it all ourselves sometimes is out there in the world like, oh, well, I know I need to be always with myself. Maybe a more common example is in couples work or in relational work. It's okay to ask for something from someone else. And we may, you know, demanding it might not go over really well. But when we get clear about we have needs and

it's human, and there's no shame about that and we can speak for it, or we can even show our vulnerability to somebody else and ask for that. That's part of living together and being in community.

Anibal: Absolutely. Beautiful.

Tisha: Yes. I have a personal example of that, if I could share.

Mariel: Please.

Tisha: I got to do a demo. I got, you know, I pick the card for a demo in a level three and my young exile was witnessed by the group and it felt so good for that child to be seen by everyone. It was, you know, I'd met with that exile before with that little girl who was out in the cold and it was so beautiful for her. It was just, it was another level of healing to have the group see what she went through.

Mariel: Yeah. That just gives me chills, you know, and perhaps...I don't want to make an assumption, but, you know, coming from the American culture, maybe we have some things in common there, but yes, I can just, you know, resonate with that. The small thing being seen, being connected, connected is one of the C words of Self-energy. Right? So, to let this little girl get connected and be seen, yes. So of course we need that, that mirroring, that validation. And some of what I think around the unburden system mandala is when the therapist can remember this part is not just this burdened feeling is not just this belief and not just this role and doesn't have to be alone. When a therapist can really look and hold the faith that if I get to know this part, no matter how it appears on the outside, I know there's some value in there. There's some light in there. There's some gift. And how exciting to meet that. So, meeting that little girl, I bet just, you know... What were her qualities, if you don't mind my asking when she really was seen and unburdened, what can you...?

Tisha: Oh, she was just, she was sparky, she was fiery and yeah. Playful and really, really wanted closeness, wanted just to be held and

Mariel: Yeah.

Tisha: Yeah, she was cool. She was three. She was...

Mariel: And by the way, she's a part of you Tisha. She's in you. And what a gift to have this part blend consciously, you know, or less consciously, just naturally in your life, in settings that can receive for... That's good for the setting to have that liveliness. I've often thought, I remember thinking this on 9/11, when I was in my office, that somebody's doing their healing work is really a generous act. In spite of these giant things that are happening in the world. Every act, like what you just described, of healing and bringing these parts gifts out into the world, that's a contribution.

Tisha: It's great to look at it like that. Thank you.

Mariel: Thank you. I got something out of you sharing that story. It landed.

Tisha: The group experience felt really important.

Mariel: Yeah. And that's when, in the trainings too, we talk about the demos are a gift for the rest of the group. You know, this resonance between people. You're healing, then gives permission to others to do the same or lights the way. It has that potential anyways.

Aníbal: Mariel, another common misunderstanding you are calling attention is: *An unburdening is forever*. What are you saying, Mariel? One unburden is not enough?

Mariel: Well, and I remember you and I speaking about this, Aníbal, too, and I'm not positive that this might've been from that conversation that it got added to the list. Because I agreed. You're a very skilled IFS therapist yourself. So, I do agree that, you know, sometimes people will say, you know, wait, I already unburdened this part, or I've already been there or it happened again. Or sometimes people think IFS is brief therapy. I don't know. It could be brief, but time is somewhat of an irrelevant variable and needs to be authentic and in real deep. But when we find that a burden is there again, the same burden of, let's say, I'm a piece of shame or some worthlessness or some fear, there could be different reasons for that. Some of the reasons are, maybe there's a new experience that hadn't been mentioned before that needs witnessing again, or maybe something new happened in the person's life. And it landed in that same sensitive spot. That's something I think you and I were resonating with, Aníbal, is that, you know, some of us have been doing this work a long time and there are just some sensitive spaces that something will come along and I might have like that allergic reaction to it, like, oh, something's activated again. Hopefully it's not as severe or as big. We are vulnerable as human beings. There are threats out there. You know, what do you think about that? You know, unburdenings aren't forever. Do you have another take on that?

Aníbal: Well. In a world so burdened, how can we unburden for good? Right?

Mariel: Well, and I will say sometimes there are burdens that just, they don't come back. I wonder about the interface of our mind and our spirit with our physical body, in this case, in our brain, you know, it could be that...Like I've when I used to work a lot with children, it felt like their burdens hadn't necessarily had as much time in there to be represented in their brain. Like those deep grooves in the brain. This one little girl I remember working with who had bad nightmares, we externalized her parts. This was early on in my IFS training. So, I was just really witnessing thinking "I'm trying this thing. This is what I learned to do". We externalized, she externalized her parts with dolls and suddenly she picked a doll and that had like Self-energy and this eight-year-old girl then started working with her nightmare with these dolls. I mean, this was really at least 20 years ago. And I remember it very clearly, a lot of it clearly, and she worked out the content of her nightmare there, and it had to do with some serious sex abuse and the next week or so I remember asking her, her mother just mentioned the nightmare stopped and the nightmares didn't come back. And I worked with her maybe another six, eight months or so. So hopefully her environment remained safe and supportive. I don't know. I haven't seen her in a long time, but in that case, I hope that unburdening was forever in that part for that burden.

Aníbal: So interesting. Mariel, as we are coming to an end and before we close this amazing talk, do you want to introduce us to the IFS Telehealth collective? What is this project that Dick Schwartz endorses as two top IFS trainers, veterans, I guess, hire and provide consultation to well-trained IFS therapists. So that if you refer to this practice, you can be confident that clients will be getting the real deal.

Mariel: Yeah. You know, it's something I didn't know I'd be doing, to tell you the truth, but a colleague of mine who is on the team, the staff of a training I did in San Francisco had created a... Her name's Marcella Cox. She created a group practice online in California where she lives a few years before the Telehealth collective. And so, she had a framework for it, and she approached Paul Ginter, lead trainer Paul Ginter and myself about joining her because she thought IFS, you know, should be more available to people. It's growing. And she had a vision for offering this in a few states. So, this was right before the pandemic started. She had approached Paul. It was almost prophetic. And, you know, I thought I needed another complex project, like a hole in my head, but I also thought it's a good idea. And as Dick and Paul and I had said, it's hard to find IFS therapists with openings. So, we created a group practice. It's only in the United States and we're in six states right now, California, New York, Massachusetts, Florida, Michigan, and Oregon with plans to expand, which always makes a part of me go, oh God, we've been drawing really fast. It's been great. All of our clinicians are IFS level one trained at least. And they meet with Paula and I every week to bring their cases. And they are all across the United States and really feel like a group practice. They're becoming friends and colleagues. We are really a group, lovely people. And I see them growing and deepening. The clients come to us with all different levels of IFS awareness. We have a library of tools for the clients and the clinicians. And Paula and I really did it for the community that we thought we might build. And after all this hard work, it's a reality.

Anibal: Such a gift.

Tisha: How can people find out about it?

Mariel: They can Google IFS therapy online.com and that will get you to us or remember IFS Telehealth collective. And we're often hiring as we grow, but it's, thanks to Marcella Cox for really creating a solid business model. I don't know how she did it or talk to us into it. But now that we're here, it's been a really lovely group

Tisha: Before we go, I wanted to ask a quick question that's completely off the topic, but I don't know if I'll get a chance again. Behind you on the wall there's this total rock and roll t-shirt and I was looking at it and I'm like, who is that band? And it's got your name on it.

Mariel: Oh my gosh.

Tisha: Can we have this story?

Mariel: That's hilarious. Okay. So right before the pandemic, I was supposed to go to Madrid to do a level one training and it was over the course of a couple of months. And I had arranged to do unburdened system retreat in Switzerland and a workshop in Copenhagen and a workshop for you, Anibal, in Portugal. And my husband was coming with, and he's a musician and he made a touring t-shirt for me. We were going to nine countries and it says Mariel Pastor World Tour 2020. It was a joke. It's got a monkey on it with some symbols because he says, you know, work monkey, work. It's got nine countries on the back. And my bags were packed completely. It started in New York with the training I did and then Madrid, et cetera, et cetera, bags were packed. And I didn't go because...

Tisha: 2019

Mariel: 2020. It started...

Tisha: Oh, 2020.

Mariel: 2020. It started March 11th or something, and then New York shut down right after that. So maybe it's, you know, that saying, you know, my parents went on vacation and all I got was this stupid t-shirt.

Tisha: Well, thanks for sharing.

Mariel: Thanks for asking

Anibal: Mariel, thank you so much for having us and for bringing these interesting common misunderstandings in IFS practice and consultation. I'm sure this is of great value to all IFS psychotherapists and practitioners.

Mariel: You know, I hope it is because I often tell people, hold the model lightly, you know, just consider that you're meeting a person with all these different little people inside, sort of. Just treat parts like people. That's one of the remedies and stay curious and listen with your heart.

Tisha: Thank you so much.

Mariel: You'll get there.

Anibal: It was, again, a great joy to sit with you and Tisha, and we hope we can keep meeting and sharing your wisdom is model our work and our lives. Thank you so much.