Ep #222: How to Befriend Your Inner Parts with Internal Family Systems (IFS) (Part 3)

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This podcast is here to guide you to understand why you think, feel, and react as you do. And today is part three in a series of episodes using a framework of internal family systems to notice the different parts of your unique internal system. Today, I'll elaborate more on the reasons why noticing your parts will benefit your life, and then I'm going to outline a practical way to deepen and befriend your different parts. Let's get started.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, I'm Kristi Angevine, a physician, Master Certified Coach, Internal Family Systems informed practitioner, and host of this podcast, where we explore the deeper psychology behind why we do what we do.

Hello, hello, everybody. Okay, big deep breath. I am personally in need of this little pause because I'm currently in a busy season of life. My kids are in different schools. There are all sorts of after-school activities. I've been traveling, what for me is quite a bit, to go to speaking engagements, both stateside and abroad. And right now, it is a season, or I should say, it is what feels like many seasons of pretty intense personal growth on top of the busyness.

So what I'm noticing in my system is that rest is absolutely critical. And not just sleep rest, but restful, nourishing things like taking some downtime to just read, giving myself extra time to reflect or meditate, taking extra time to rest by connecting with my family and friends. In these busy times where there's a lot of personal growth going on, I have to take really good care of myself. And part of taking care of myself looks like openly sharing my vulnerabilities with my crew of trusted people.

Doing these things isn't easy: getting rest, opening up. And the irony is that I can tell people and guide people all day long about self-care and rest and being authentic and keeping it real and being vulnerable, but I personally keep learning again and again and again all the challenges and the joy in actually doing this. I mention this because if you are also finding yourself in a very busy season, if you are feeling all the feels that come with personal growth, I am sending you a big hug.

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It's not easy sometimes. And more often than not, we can sometimes forget that change is inevitable, and we are going to feel better. Usually, difficulty precedes very important insights. So may both of us be on the cusp of something really meaningful. As I hear myself say that, I'm thinking, wow, that sounded a bit aspirational and highfalutin, but oh well.

So if you are new to the podcast, I am really, really glad you're here. My goal is always for you to realize that change, although not effortless, is actually easier than you may realize, even for the most deeply ingrained patterns and habits. And once you have a framework that makes sense to you and you have some tools that you've made your own, then you can start understanding and shifting just about any pattern or habit.

So for today's episode, I'm going to pick up where I left off in part two, which is episode number 221. Now, if you missed episodes 220 and 221, now would be a good time to press pause and go catch up on those so this doesn't seem totally disjointed. But to refresh your memory a little, in episodes 220 and 221, I introduced the Internal Family Systems or IFS framework and explained that it's a tool that can help you explore how your habits and reactions are shaped by the different parts or aspects of your personality.

The word "parts" used in this way of thinking can be thought of as the distinct sub-personalities that you have within your own internal psyche. Some parts, like our inner critic or our inner perfectionist, are really easy to spot. Well, other parts, such as maybe parts that seek approval, or parts that compare, or parts that quietly fear rejection and try to blend in, these parts can be a little more subtle. And by learning to recognize both the obvious and the subtle parts, we can begin to see these parts not as problems to fix, but as these really important entities that are well worth our time to understand.

So together in episodes 220 and 221, we laid a foundation for working with your parts. And when you can work with your parts, your self-awareness

grows and you can start seeing your parts as allies, which helps you transform deeply ingrained habits and reactions.

So let's jump off from where we left off and take things a bit deeper. Now that you have a foundation for understanding what parts are and noticing them, today is all about the process of befriending your different parts. Now, if this sounds just like crazy talk to befriend the parts of your system, do not worry. I will explain every bit.

Let me use an analogy to kind of bring this together. Imagine you are on a vacation, like a sightseeing tour, and you are with a group of people. And you're going to be traveling together with this same group of people for, say, two weeks. You don't know this group very well, and it's totally possible that you could just travel and see the sites and go to the restaurants and not really need to get to know who you're with. But let's say your travel plans totally change, and now instead of being on a sightseeing vacation with these people, an emergency hits and your group is designated as the think tank that has to implement certain strategies to get through whatever disaster has befallen you.

All of a sudden, not knowing your travel buddies could be a recipe for trouble. When the rubber meets the road and you're in a situation that's more complicated than just a vacation, knowing the people that you are with is really important. It's useful to know their personalities, their strengths, their weaknesses, their quirks, and the conditions in which they will thrive versus the conditions in which they're just going to limp along. To survive, much less thrive, it's going to be really practical to develop rapport and connection and trust. And this is especially true if you are the leader of that group.

Now, the group of people I'm talking about represents your inner system of parts. The leader in this example represents you. And the more complicated situation or the problem that your team is tasked with navigating represents your life. Now, in contrast to the complicated situation that you're in, vacation time would represent just times in your life where

there's nothing that pressing going on, and you're kind of just cruising along, and getting to know your parts of your system may not seem that important.

Now, back to this emergency situation. If you are a leader in a situation like this, one option is with your team that you can just be ambivalent, be a bit passive, let the dominant personalities kind of rule, and this would be life on autopilot, not examining your patterns, not making space to get to know all the different parts, and just doing what you've always done, possibly drifting through seasons of boredom and meaninglessness, crisis and relief, perhaps having punctuated experiences of agency, purpose, and joy, but generally just kind of like letting things unfold naturally without really doing much of anything.

Another way to navigate a crisis or your life is to get to know everyone on your team. Now, to do this calls on you to know who's on your team, kind of like a roll call. And then it calls on you to befriend everyone, establish rapport, get to know the people. What makes them tick? What do they love more than anything? What pains them? And this stands in stark contrast to a life on autopilot.

Now, let's connect this to your inner ecosystem of parts. For you to be able to traverse the complications and the ups and downs of life, you need to get to know your parts. To get to know your parts, you first have to notice your parts, because you can't get to know what you don't first notice. Like, if I go to meet a friend for coffee and I show up at the coffee shop and I look around and I don't see her anywhere, well, we're not going to chat because I don't see her.

But say she's actually cozied up in the back corner at a couch and she's waving at me, but I don't see her and I don't hear her because I've got my earbuds in and I'm distracted. Well, in this situation, unless she stands up and comes and grabs me, I'm going to miss the chance to connect and I'm going to erroneously conclude that there was no one there to meet.

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Getting to know our parts of our inner system can be just like this. If we don't pay attention, if we don't detect our parts, we can't even realize they're there. And if we can't get space from our parts, we can never learn about our parts.

So if at this point in time you are a new listener and you haven't heard much about IFS and you haven't listened to episodes 220 and 221, if you're noticing that it sounds like there's just a bunch of lingo and references that kind of don't make sense, it's totally okay.

I recognize that sometimes this world of talking about an internal system and talking about parts can just sound like just something really odd. So if that is the case, nothing's gone wrong. It just means that there's some foundational information that will really serve you as you start getting a little bit more complex with your understanding of internal family systems. So, now again, you're out. You can go listen to episodes 220 and 221, and that will give you a great jumping-off point.

But back to detecting parts. One reason that we often can't detect our parts is that no one taught us how. Another reason is if we don't know to watch for our parts, we're not going to detect a part because we are essentially too close to notice. In episodes 220 and 221, you heard a laundry list of common kinds of parts, which means you're now much more equipped to detect your own parts.

But what does detecting your parts have to do with creating more intentional habits? Well, awareness precedes all change. And when it comes to our habits, our unintentional thoughts, our unintentional emotions, our unintentional reactions, when repeated often enough, they become our unintentional and sometimes our most soul-crushing habits. Awareness of our unintentional parts is the first step towards understanding why we do what we do when we're on autopilot. And this is the prerequisite for making change.

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So where does this idea of befriending come in? And what is befriending anyways? Well, when it comes to our habits and the parts of us that drive those habits, oftentimes, we do not like these habits, and we don't like the parts of us that do these habits. Does anyone love their inner critic? Or how about how do you feel about having heavy guilt after you were really curt with a loved one? So often, we do not like certain parts of us. And common advice for a part that's just like hard on you as an inner critic will sound like, "tame your inner critic, silence it, banish it, ignore it. You tell it who's boss."

And trust me, if this type of approach worked for the parts of us that were the most difficult and troublesome, I wouldn't even point it out as a problem because I would just say, "Go do it. Go silence your inner critic. Go banish that guilt." The problem is, it just doesn't work. Our parts behave kind of like people. And what do people do when you try to banish them or tame them or ignore them or silence them? You know where that goes, right? It just doesn't work.

So the counterintuitive and effective approach for changing your most deeply ingrained habits involves befriending your parts. So here's the thing. Befriending is kind of fun. You actually get to put on a little bit of a researcher hat as well as just like a hanging out friend hat. And you get to start to get to know the parts of your system just like you would get to know your travel buddies turned think tank teammates in the emergency that I mentioned at the beginning.

So to start this process of befriending your own internal parts, you can't just be this cold, aloof researcher with a clipboard. You actually need to endeavor to really get to know what makes your parts tick and to deeply understand what makes them uniquely them. So I'm going to give you some very specific things that you can do to befriend your own internal parts.

So first off, I think it's great to have a document or a map or a list. So you can create a document or a map of your parts, and you can add to it as you notice them. So if you like a list, make a list. It could sound like

"perfectionist part," "existential crisis part," "people-pleasing part," "chicken little part," "mom guilt part," "time tracking part."

Or it could be a chart, or it could be a word with a circle around it and lines connecting to other parts like a family tree. Some people will ask their parts, how would you like to be represented on the page? And then they will just draw that.

So somehow, some way, you want to make a document that lists or notes the different parts that you've noticed in your system after listening to the last couple of episodes. As you notice as you're going through your day, the appearance of some of these parts, whether they are a cameo or they are a bigger, louder sort of takeover, you can start adding details and descriptions to your document. Descriptions like this, "When the part shows up, what do you notice that you're thinking or telling yourself? When the part shows up, what are you feeling emotionally? What does your body feel like? What do you do when this part is present? And what situations does this part show up often in?"

Now, once you have a sense of what it's like for you to experience the presence of a particular part, the befriending process looks just like it would look in real life if you were trying to establish rapport with a person. It's taking a little time to connect with one part at a time and just ask some questions to get to know it. Now, I need to pause and name something right here. I am explicitly suggesting that you make a map of your many inner personalities and then take that map and flesh out profiles for each part, and then go on to have a conversation to get to know these parts.

And to some of you, this is going to sound a bit zany and odd, kind of a crazy train idea. And if so, I get it. And here's what I recommend. Just give it a shot and see how it goes. As a pragmatist, I take what works, and what I have found is that, despite how unusual this approach is, so often it works. So if it works for you, beautiful. And if it does not, you don't have to ever, ever do it again.

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Now, to address this using parts language, you may have a strong set of skeptical parts like I do. And right about now, when I'm talking about making this map and talking to your parts, these parts might be saying things like, "Oh, please, this sounds like pseudoscience. It's total gibberish. And not only that, this is weird, personifying errant thoughts, treating these random quips and emotions like they're distinct little entities. Not only is it strange, but it sounds like a waste of time. Or maybe, maybe it sounds like a cult."

So this is what my skeptic parts will say when they encounter something that they do not understand and kind of makes no sense. So here's what I do with the parts of me that really love evidence and the scientific method, and they want to know that something works and they want to know that something is safe. What I do is I just note these parts being present, and I thank them for keeping me safe, for keeping my best interests at heart. And I just validate, "Yeah, you know, this is weird. You have a point."

And then I will just ask inside if these parts would just entertain me for a bit. Let me try this new thing, and tell them that I'll let them know how it goes. And I will check in on them later to see what their thoughts are. And I noticed that even my strongest desire for a randomized control trial level of evidence, usually that desire feels okay about experimenting and re-evaluating later. Because heck, if something does prove to be ridiculous or does show itself to be pseudoscience, these skeptical parts of me can say, "I told you so." And that's okay. And as an aside, you just kind of witnessed an example of what it might look like to befriend a skeptical part.

So now, back to befriending once you have made a list or a map. To befriend simply means to warmly foster a friendly connection with some inquiry. And it can be as simple as internally saying, "Hi, how are you?" Some of my clients will say things like, "Oh, hi there, brain. I see you doing that thing again." It can also be as deep as saying, "Hey, what's your purpose? What are you worried would happen if you didn't show up like this every day?"

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Now, I find the process of befriending is easiest when you have a bit of time and when you feel calm or at least a little curious or simply friendly. If I am really stressed and anxious and I'm looking at my schedule and I'm like, "Ah, I don't have enough time," and I'm going to try to befriend some parts, my befriending in air quotes is going to sound like, "Hey, I see you. Can we like hurry this along? And I'd really love to hear what you're all about and hear how long you've been here and why you do what you do and yada yada yada. Because I have to go in like 45 seconds. So ready? Go."

If I were to approach befriending a part like this, my part is going to either disappear or give me a nice slow blink. So you want to have a little bit of time and ideally feel a bit calm or a bit curious. But you don't have to wait until you feel 100% calm, 100% curious, and super friendly to try to befriend your parts. You just need a modicum or critical mass of these qualities. It is enough to feel somewhat curious, somewhat calm.

But once you do, I've got some prompts for you that you can use, and I will show you how to use them. Prompt number one is you ask, "What do you want me to know?" Prompt number two, you ask, "What can I do to support you?" Prompt number three, you ask, "What are you concerned would happen if I didn't listen when you showed up?" And prompt number four, you ask, "How long have you been in this role?"

Now, when you ask each question, your job is not to think the answer in your brain. Your job is to wait for an answer to come to you with the same open, not knowing that you have when you're watching a movie or a show and you've never seen it before, or you're turning the page in a new book.

Now, an answer from a part can bubble into your awareness in a few different forms. You could ask, "What do you want me to know?" And you could get some words or thoughts back. You could get an emotion, a sensation in your body, a memory, or a montage of memories, or you could just get an image or a color. You might see someone talking to you or you could notice maybe an energetic shift.

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Now, you're going to know if you're overthinking and thinking your answer if your answer to your question has a very intellectual, analytical, or kind of a storyteller feel to it. Let me give you an example.

Say you are trying to get to know the part of you that's quite perfectionistic, and you ask, "Hey, what would you like me to know?" The overthinking answer might sound like, "Oh, you know what? I think this part really needs control because I don't like that feeling of being out of control. I never have. Even when I was doing spelling bees in elementary school, I thought failing was terrible. It was just not an option. And I think that this comes from a part that's really rigid and this part's probably just always trying to keep me safe."

This type of answer is usually from a cognitive sort of thinking part and it's characterized by a bunch of speculation and analysis and the words "I think" are often times peppered throughout. As opposed to, if you ask, "What do you want me to know?" and you just wait, the answer that comes to you might sound like, "We can't fail. I won't let that happen."

And then if you were to ask a follow-up like, "Well, why not?" you might notice a swell of pressure in your chest or a memory of a failure, or you might hear something like, "Don't you see? It's just too risky. They're going to hate us and then reject us." See the difference between the thinking-type answer and an answer that just sort of spontaneously shows up.

So this is what it looks like to befriend a part. You just notice the part you want to connect with, and you ask some questions. So let me give you those prompts again. Number one, what do you want me to know? This question is just to ask a part like, what do you want me to know so I can know you better? Question two: How can I support you? What can I do to support you? Number three, what are you concerned would happen if I didn't listen when you showed up? And number four, how long have you been in this role?

Now, I recommend that you use these questions simply as guides and you actually let your own curiosity take over. So if you ask a question and you

get an answer, just keep asking whatever you're curious about. So if I heard a part of me say, "Don't you see, it's too risky. We'll be hated and then rejected." If I was feeling really warm and compassionate, I might just validate and respond back, "Oh my gosh, I hear you. That makes so much sense. Being rejected would make failing feel risky." If I was feeling curious, I might ask, "Gosh, where did this worry about rejection come from?" Or, "Can you help me really, really understand what is it about rejection that's so bad?"

Now, when I do this process, I really like doing it with writing out a question and then doing a dash underneath that and writing out the answer. So I have a visual cue for when I'm sort of sliding between the friendly interviewer and the answer from the part. But some clients, I know, like doing this without paper. And sometimes I don't have time to write everything down, so I will just do it internally as well. It's like an internal dialogue. Other people will use a voice memo and speak their observations. There's not a right or more effective way. There's just a way that works for you, and I recommend you just experiment.

Now, I think it's really useful when you're befriending a part and getting to know it, to set an amount of time that you're going to do this befriending process. So upfront, just like you would for any appointment, you know that there's a start and there's an end. And if it suits you to begin with an intention and then wrap up with maybe a particular way of closing things, here's what this might look like.

You might start and say, "Hey, my intention is to learn about whatever part needs my attention," or, "My intention is to learn about my perfectionistic part that I noticed came up in the meeting yesterday. And I plan to explore for about 20 minutes." And then you go into explorer, and then for a closing, you tell your part, "Hey, it's about time to wrap up, but this is a conversation that's to be continued."

And then if it feels authentic to you, you might just thank the part for sharing what it shared and see if there are any last questions or comments. I

recommend that if you do this type of closing, that you check to see if there are any of your other parts have anything that they want to say about what maybe you learned from the original part. And if you noticed any skeptical parts or other parts show up during your befriending, you want to check in with them specifically and say, "Hey, the part that really hated this part that showed up, do you have anything you want to offer?"

And then just like, you know, when you get your haircut, you will schedule your next haircut. I think it works really well to say, "Hey, I'm going to be back within the week to touch base again, but if you need me earlier, just let me know."

Now, there's an important thing to note here. As you are getting to know a part, you should anticipate that other parts besides the one you're aiming to befriend may show up. When you are befriending a part, it's almost like you're in your office and you have somebody sitting down with you, but your door is open and you have an open-door policy, and lots of people start showing up in your office because they have been waiting for you to get off the phone and they saw that you're off the phone and you're talking to somebody, but they really want to come in as well.

This is what our parts do. Sometimes, if they notice that we're listening, other parts will show up, or if they notice we're talking to a part that they don't like, they will show up. So if this is the case for you, you can do just like you would do in real life, and you can say, "Hey, I can only listen to one at a time. Could you wait? Could you temporarily hang out over there? Could you temporarily go to a waiting room so I can listen to this one first?" And often that will be sufficient to get you back on track with the part that you want to understand more.

But if it doesn't, you can just shift into more of a longitudinal tracking and just notice what parts show up and just name them and list them as they do. Or you can completely shift your inquiry to whatever part seems like it needs your attention most. Now, although I am sharing with you a variety of steps and guides and prompts to take, I want you to keep in mind that

there's not actually a formula that requires a certain sequence or certain prompts that will lead you to enlightenment.

The reality of understanding yourself and creating habits that can help you flourish is it is non-linear, and sometimes it's smooth, but most of the time it is messy and clunky, and the more you apply the ideas you learn in this podcast, the deeper you go with it, the less like the textbook things will actually look. So if you do this and you feel like, "Wow, it doesn't seem as straightforward as I thought," well, that's because you're probably doing it right.

So let's recap. Your internal parts can be very subtle, or they can be big and obvious. But either way, your awareness of their presence is the prerequisite for understanding yourself deeply. The first step to more deeply understanding your parts is to list them or map them out, or just get really clear on what parts are there and what it's like for you when they're present. How they feel, what you're thinking, what you do, what circumstances they show up in.

Then, instead of trying to squash them or tame them or talk back to them or get rid of them, you are better served to get to know them and befriend them. And you can do this by starting off as curious and open as possible and asking questions and waiting for their answers. Now, doing this kind of work can, number one, just seem weird, and number two, for some of my clients, despite reassurances that having a myriad of different parts is normal, it's discussed across many cultures, across history, clients will worry that talking to the little people in their heads is proof that they are broken or crazy.

I want to offer you this. The benefit of this odd and counterintuitive approach is huge, but I do not expect you to take my word for it. It's kind of like in that book, *Green Eggs and Ham*, try it, try it, you will see. Try it, you might like it. This is a technique that you just have to try and see for yourself. Now, this was a very, very dense episode. There's lots of nuance,

lots of complexity. So take it slow. Feel free to send me any questions that you've got.

And if you're not yet on the email list, well, that's how you can contact me. Go to habitsonpurpose.com and you will see a little box where you can sign up to the newsletter. And if you press reply to any email, it will come to me and I will write you back. Until next week, my sweet friends, take care.

If you liked what you heard today, please follow, rate, and review. As of this moment, there are thousands of listeners, but just hundreds of ratings and reviews. Now, bridging that gap is not for vanity, and it's not for my ego, but it's so that people who are looking for help with their habits can more easily find a resource that's practical and transformative. And hey, listen, I also let ratings and reviews slide. I listen to a podcast and then I get busy. I'm running some errands, and then I forget. And a part of me thinks, "Ooh, I'll do it later." And later never comes.

So my challenge to you is pause me mid-sentence, go add a rating and a review. It doesn't need to take more than 15 seconds, but it will have a lasting impact that will help more than you know. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Talk to you soon.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit HabitsOnPurpose.com. Tune in next week for another episode.