

IFS Month 5 – 5.1 Burdens—The Steps of Healing

Toni: Hi, everybody. Welcome back. This month we're going to be talking about a very important subject, which is the healing of exiles. Last month, you heard from Pam about the essential aspect of this model which is learning to negotiate with a protective system in order to create the safety to be able to go to exiles. I do want to just say a last couple of things about protectors. You've heard a lot about them. Pam and I both love protectors. We love working with protectors. We feel dedicated to helping students understand the importance of maintaining a relationship with protectors.

I do want to just show you this drawing here on the flip chart. When I'm training in front of students, which I am right now except that you're not in the room with me, I draw this illustration to show how ... You'll see, this is, if you can't tell what it is, this is an umbrella right here. This umbrella signifies the protective system, so I'm just going to put a P right here. Then underneath you'll see that there are some little feet and this signifies the exiles, the young parts, the vulnerability, the little parts that live underneath the protection of the umbrella.

I think why I'm cycling back to this as a reminder is that we don't have exiles and protectors that run alone in the system and we don't have protectors that live alone in the system, so that if you are being presented with your clients with a very strong protective system, a light protective system, anytime there's a protective response, there will be vulnerability, there will be an exile underneath. It's just a reminder over and over and over again is that we're always working with more than one part. We're always keeping in our mind that there are exiles underneath, beneath protection. I just wanted to make that reminder before I move on to talking more about exiles.

I'm going to be working from the PowerPoint which you have and we're going to be talking about this very important, as I said, this very important aspect of the model which is the presence and healing of the vulnerable parts in the system. Just to remind you, I'm going to do little reminders about exiles. Pam talked about exiles last time. Exiles are usually, and of course, there are no fast and hard rules in IFS. This is one of the wonderful things about the model is that we can always be surprised, but exiles are, in general, young. They are the parts that carry the burdens, the wounds, the beliefs, the beliefs about themselves that they picked up from overt or covert trauma in their lives. They are exiled in the system.

The reason that they're called exiles is that they are removed; there is an attempt to remove them from the system even for their own safety or for the safety of the system. There are, as we talked about, as Pam talked about last time and I talked about the time before that, there are protectors whose job it is to take care of the exiles themselves and then there are protectors in the system whose job it is to take care of the system and not allow the feelings, the burdens, the shame of exiles to infect the system. I want to say that even though this whole protective system is setup to guard against the feelings, being flooded with the feelings of the exiles, it doesn't always work. Some of the protective responses that worked in childhood no longer work in adulthood. We see this when we're working with couples all the time.

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The other idea is that the exiles don't necessarily feel protected. I remember early in my IFS career and I was doing some of my own work and working with some of my own protectors, and it became very clear that my young vulnerable parts were as afraid of my angry parts as they were other people's angry parts. It was such a great experience to have internally, to feel into what that was like. That the part that my angry parts or my parts that were angry were trying to protect did not actually feel protected. That every time the angry part of me would take a step externally, those exiles of mine actually felt more abandoned.

It's an important thing to remember because your clients will tell you that they need the protection, that there are parts in the system that really need the protection. What we want to invite in this model is that the self-energy self is more powerful than any protection. That, sometimes, can be very hard to sell to people, sell to protectors. It takes a leap of faith for protectors to believe that they don't have to continue the job that they've been doing for so long. Hoping that that makes sense.

I want to talk a little bit about burdens. Pam did a beautiful job of explaining burdens, but I want to just reiterate it because in the healing process, what we're doing is helping people unload or lift off the burdens and beliefs that have been accumulated over time in the system. Again, burdens are uncomfortable feelings, negative beliefs that young parts of us have taken on as a result of experiences in the world. How I like to frame it is this way. Children make meaning from external events and burdens are what grow out of that meaning. Sometimes in the training I will do this drawing to illustrate this.

Okay, so let's say, for instance, that this is a system, a system of a human being. In this model, and remember that this is our theory that you're trying on potentially, we are born ... The human system is born already multiplied. These circles signify parts. Then the other theory in this model is that we are already born with self or self-energy. This is not something that has to be developed in relationship nor does it get obliterated from trauma. This orange color, which actually doesn't work there so I will use a different color ... We'll use pink to signify.

Let's just say, for the sake of the theory, that the human systems comes into being with both parts and self. When a child is born and there is no getting away from this no matter what kind of perfect parenting or environment you grow up in, things begin to happen from the external world. Here we're signifying ... This might represent events from the outside world. Of course, there are some children that grow up with much more serious trauma than others, but regardless, we begin to have trauma, we have little T, traumas; mis-attunement from very loving parents that's inevitable; ruptures in relationship, kindergarten. I think if I had a doll or for every client of mine that came into my office and had a trauma in first grade, I could retire right now.

What begins to happen is that the parts, these vulnerable parts in the system begin to make meaning of these external events. The burdens are what grow out of this meaning. They can manifest, like Pam was talking about in feelings, really strong feelings of shame, burdens can feel like sensation in the body. Regardless, they are beliefs. I'm going to use yet another color here, let's say green, to signify the beliefs

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and the burdens that these young parts begin to take on as a result of the external experiences coming in from the external world. Hopefully this makes sense so far.

Then, finally, here is where the protective system begins to develop. If I have a burden of shame and I was a child that was profoundly shamed when I was in school, so I began to develop parts of me, manager parts of me that said, "Never again. Never again, never again will you feel humiliated like that." Makes sense? I think it does. Made sense to me when I was a little girl, that's for sure. I started to develop a protective system that was going to make sure that I avoided shame at all costs.

Now, let's say here's blue because my red ink was running out, here are my protector, my protective triangle saying, "No more shame. No more shame, Toni. We're going to do everything that we can to make sure you don't feel shame." What I want you to see here is that the bigger the protective system gets, the more obscured the self-energy is in the circle. Now, my system, if this were my system, is being run by these parts of me that want to prevent me from being flooded with terrible feelings of shame and humiliation. These protective parts believe that they are actually my best resource. I think you could probably relate to this or you can relate to your clients that come in and say this, talk about this, talk about these same experiences.

In this model, as you heard Pam, you saw Pam, we worked with some of Pam's part; she worked with some of mine. What we're wanting to do is develop a relationship with these protectors ... One more drawing, one more drawing here. We're wanting to help the protectors relax and step back, soften and begin to trust that the self of the client becomes the resource. That there are less, the energy of these protective parts is less, not the protective parts. We're not getting rid of them. We're helping them unload, unburden, step back and rest so that you can help your clients bring this energy of self to whatever the wounded parts are.

Since I was talking about myself, I'll just continue, is to ... My process has been, over time, is to learn to love and understand the shame and unburden the shame in my own system. That's what I'm going to be talking about right now. Just to finish this segment, I'm going to talk about one more thing. We're going to look at one more slide and that is the steps of healing in IFS. I'm just going to go through this briefly right now and then in the next segment, I'm going to pull them apart one by one and talk about each process.

When protectors have finally relaxed and they finally trusted that help is on their way, we begin to get permission to start to move closer to the exiles or the vulnerable parts in the system. It is very important at this point in the therapy that the client has enough self-energy to be able to do this work. When we say enough self-energy, we're talking about a percentage. We're not asking anybody, including ourselves, to have no parts onboard. That would never happen anyway in this model, but that there is enough of a percentage to be able to bring a presence and compassion and to stay clear and open to be able to work with these exiles, to be able to witness them, understand them and help them unburden.

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We're going to start again by asking the client that very important question: "How do you feel toward this vulnerable part?" We want to make sure that they're saying words like "I feel open-hearted," "I feel compassionate," "I want to help," "I'm available." I like to start hearing the language of "I'm able to be present with whatever is happening here." then we want to begin to build trust again with this new part. Exiles are sometimes, like Pam was talking about, exiles are sometimes frightened to be met in this way because it's new. This is very, very unfamiliar to be met in this way.

The next step in the steps of healing is to witness the entire story of the exile. The time that this takes is up to the exile itself, the young part itself. Sometimes It's very quick; sometimes it takes a long time. We are pacing ourselves to the speed of the exile. Sometimes it happens visually; sometimes it happens through stories. Sometimes it comes through the body. We invite this young part to begin to communicate in whatever way it needs to, to let itself be known and understood and witnessed.

Once that's done, we have a process of retrieval which is the process of inviting the young part, the vulnerable part to come out of the past where it has been stuck probably for the lifetime of the client or a long, long time. Maybe you'll remember in the work that I did with Pam when I asked her protector how long had it been doing this, she said forever. You often hear this, that these burdens are accumulated quite young and then the protector is working hard from the time that exile gets wounded. We're going to invite the process. We're going to invite the child part to move from the scene in the past or the past experience into the present.

The next step then is the ritual of unburdening. As I said, I'm going to go through this in much more detail in the next few segments. Once that's done which is the changing of, the unloading of, the unburdening of beliefs and burdens, then we make an invitation to the young part to reclaim some qualities that it lost when it was originally wounded. Finally, there's an integration process which is a little bit different in IFS. When we talk about integration, we talk about all parts welcome, not all parts coming into one.

That's the overview of the process and we're going to be taking each one of these steps, part in the next segment. Thanks and I'll see you then.