

## Going Beyond Mindfulness with Internal Family Systems

### *Dick Schwartz on Achieving Awareness and Healing with IFS Therapy*

Richard Schwartz (/author/bio/2399/richard-schwartz)



As therapists increasingly incorporate mindfulness into their work, they're discovering what Buddhists have known for centuries: everyone (even those with severe inner turmoil) can access a state of spacious well-being by beginning to notice their more turbulent thoughts and feelings, rather than becoming swallowed up by them. As people relate to their disturbing inner experiences from this calm, mindful place, not only are they less overwhelmed, but they can become more accepting of the aspects of themselves with which they've been struggling. Still the question remains of how best to incorporate mindfulness into psychotherapy.

A perennial quandary in psychotherapy, as well as spirituality, is whether the goal is to help people come to accept the inevitable pain of the human condition with more equanimity or to actually transform and heal the pain, shame, or terror, so that it's no longer a problem. Are we seeking acceptance or transformation, passive observation or engaged action, a stronger connection to the here-and-now or an understanding of the past?

Many therapeutic attempts to integrate mindfulness have adopted what I'll call the passive-observer form of mindfulness---a client is helped to notice thoughts and emotions from a place of separation and extend acceptance toward them. The emphasis isn't on trying to change or replace irrational cognitions, but on noticing them and then acting in ways that the observing self considers more adaptive or functional.

This shift from struggling to correct or override cognitive distortions to noticing and accepting them is revolutionary in a field that's been so dominated by CBT. Clearly, learning to mindfully witness experiences helps clients a great deal, even those with diagnoses previously considered intractable. But what if it were possible to transform this inner drama, rather than just keep it at arm's length by taking mindfulness one step further?

### **The Second Step**

As a therapist, I've worked with clients who've come to me after having seen therapists who'd helped them to be more mindful of their impulses to cut themselves, binge on food or drugs, or commit suicide. While those impulses remained in their lives, these clients were no longer losing their battles with them, nor were they ashamed or afraid of them any longer. The clients' functioning had improved remarkably. The goal of the therapeutic approach that I use, Internal Family Systems (IFS), was to build on this important first step of separating from and accepting these impulses, and then take a second step of helping clients transform them.

For example, Molly had been in and out of hospital treatment centers until, through her DBT treatment, she was able to separate from and be accepting of the part of her that had repeatedly directed her to try to kill herself. As a result of that successful treatment, she'd stayed out of the hospital for more than two years, was holding down a job, and was connected to people in her support group. From my clinical viewpoint, she was now ready for the next step in her therapeutic growth. My goal was to help her get to know her suicidality---not just as an impulse to be accepted, but as a "part" of her that was trying to help her in some way.

In an early session, after determining she was ready to take this step, I asked her to focus on that suicidal impulse and how she felt toward it. She said she no longer feared it and had come to feel sorry for it, because she sensed that it was scared. Like many clients, she also began to spontaneously see an inner image, in her case a tattered, homeless woman who rejected her compassion. I invited her to ask this woman what she was afraid would happen if Molly continued to live. The woman replied that Molly would continue to suffer excruciating emotional pain. With some help in that session, Molly was able to embrace the woman, show her appreciation for trying to protect her from extreme suffering, and learn about the hurting part of her that the woman protected her from. In subsequent sessions, Molly, in her mind's eye, entered the original abuse scene, took the little girl she saw there out of it to a safe place, and released the terror and shame she'd carried throughout her life. Once the old woman could see that the girl was safe, she began to support Molly's steps into a fuller life and stopped encouraging her to try to escape the prospect of lifelong suffering through suicide. In this way, the "enemy" became an ally.

### **More than a Monkey Mind**

If you consider your thoughts, emotions, urges, and impulses to be coming from an inner landscape that's best understood as a kind of internal family, populated by sub-personalities, many of whom are childlike and are suffering, then it makes more sense to take that next step of comforting and holding these inner selves rather than just observing and objectifying them. All clients need to do to begin exploring this apparently chaotic and mysterious inner world is to focus inside with genuine curiosity and start asking questions, as Molly did, and these inner family members will begin to emerge. As the process continues, clients will be able to form I-thou relationships with their parts, rather than the more detached, I-it relationships that most psychotherapies and many spiritualities foster.

Once a client, in a mindful state, enters such an inner dialogue, she'll typically learn from her parts that they're suffering and/or are trying to protect her. As she does this, she's shifting from the passive-observer state to an increasingly engaged and relational form of mindfulness that naturally exists within.

Working in this way can be an intense and challenging task, which regularly requires me to step out of my emotional comfort zone and experience "parts" in myself and my clients that I might otherwise wish to avoid. At the same time, on my best days, I feel blessed to be able to accompany clients on inner journeys into both the terror and wonder of what it means to be fully human. At those moments, I can't imagine a more mindful way to practice the therapist's craft.

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