

Inner Relationship Focusing

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Abstract

Inner relationship focusing builds on the tools of internal family systems and nonviolent communication by providing a different type of model for self-exploration. Whereas internal family systems and nonviolent communication both generally employ the intellect, inner relationship focusing encourages us to lower our attention from the “comfort zone” of the rational mind and look for clues in bodily sensations, thus equipping us to provide a more contemplative and healing experience for others.

Keywords: Inner relationship focusing, Internal family systems, Nonviolent communication, Spiritual direction, Supervision, Trauma-informed care

I had not encountered the term “inner relationship focusing” (IRF) before taking the “Art of Supervision I” advanced certificate course through the Together in the Mystery training program, but I believe it is something I have been intuitively practicing since I took my first unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE) a number of years ago.

During my first unit of CPE, my educator often said things like “Why don’t you check in with yourself about that,” “Just pause and notice how that feels,” and “Let’s make some space for that.” These phrases were strange to me because, until then, I was not very aware of my inner world. On the rare occasions when I did notice what was going on within me, I was more likely to deny my feelings than to make space for them. Thankfully, as a result of the CPE process, I soon became more self-aware.

Later, as my CPE cohort began to study internal family systems (IFS), I started to understand why I had often struggled with competing emotions within myself. I learned that my personality had different “parts” with different perspectives. While each of these parts had a valid point of view, they sometimes took up more than their fair share of my energy, leaving me feeling off balance. The IFS model added to what my educator had already introduced, helping me become more curious about my emotions. One of the things I liked best about IFS was that it was non-pathologizing, encouraging me to notice my “parts” without judging them. As Richard Schwartz explains,

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IFS operates from the radically different assumption that each part—no matter how demonic seeming—has a secret, painful history to share of how it was forced into its role and came to carry burdens it doesn't like that continue to drive it. This also implies clear steps for helping these parts and the people they are in to heal and change.¹

The next paradigm shift occurred when I learned about nonviolent communication (NVC). The NVC model teaches that all human behavior is an attempt to meet a need and, while we each have the same basic needs, we often disagree about the best way to meet those needs. By attempting to understand the needs another person is trying to meet, we are able to have more compassion for that person. According to Marshall Rosenberg, "As NVC replaces our old patterns of defending, withdrawing, or attacking in the face of judgment and criticism, we come to perceive ourselves and others, as well as our intentions and relationships, in a new light. Resistance, defensiveness, and violent reactions are minimized."² NVC is a tool for working with others and, when combined with IFS, it can also help us understand ourselves, increase our self-compassion, and ultimately meet our own needs. The IFS and NVC tools I gained during CPE enabled me to be a compassionate chaplain and spiritual director. These tools became even more useful when I began the work of ministry supervision. As a supervisor, I have witnessed lives changed through the self-understanding IFS and NVC create.

Inner relationship focusing (IRF) builds on these tools by providing a different type of model for self-exploration. Whereas IFS and NVC both generally employ the intellect, IRF encourages us to lower our attention from the "comfort zone" of the rational mind and look for clues in bodily sensations. "Focusing is the process of listening to your body in a gentle, accepting way and hearing the messages that your inner self is sending you," writes Ann Weiser Cornell. "It's a process of honoring the wisdom that you have inside you, becoming aware of the subtle level of knowing that speaks to you through your body."³

In my experience, this "tuning in" to what I am sensing allows me to more fully connect with the present moment. IRF gives me permission to experience a feeling without having to label it as a particular emotion or classify it as a certain "part." I can welcome bodily reactions such as tears and shivers, and I can experience images and memories without rational interpretation. If words seem insufficient to describe what I am feeling, I can just say "that whole thing about . . ." Tapping into this kind of "felt sense" is empowering because it supports me in connecting with my intuition, something my own culture has discouraged through its emphasis on science and productivity.

Like IFS, IRF is non-pathologizing, but IRF offers even more radical acceptance of what is emerging in the present moment. IRF has no intention of interfering, judging, or changing what is going on; instead, it presupposes an inner coherence. I can just say, "Everything is as it should be. Let's just take a little time to experience it."

IRF is not only useful for my own self-exploration; it is also a gift I can share with others through spiritual direction and supervision. Many of the people I meet with remark that our sessions are among the few times they get to slow down, and they state that the experience is healing. This suggests that they would also welcome the opportunity to reconnect with their bodily sensations and find more self-compassion. When I utilize IRF language in sessions, saying things like, “What are you noticing within yourself?,” “Let’s just take a moment to sit with that,” and “Notice if there is an image or memory coming to you now,” I am not only creating an experience that is both contemplative and evocative; I am creating an experience in which the entire human experience is honored.

I have been intuitively practicing IRF since I (unknowingly) encountered it in CPE, and I have been combining that intuitive practice with intellectual tools such as IFS and NVC when meeting with others for spiritual direction and supervision. Now that I have a better understanding of IRF, however, I appreciate the value of dropping below the mind into the body. I therefore encourage others to connect with their own bodily sensations, rather than giving disproportionate emphasis to rational knowledge and analysis. IRF equips me to provide a more contemplative experience for others, an experience that evokes their inner wisdom and facilitates their restoration to wholeness.

NOTES

¹ Richard C. Schwartz, *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model* (Sounds True, 2021), 21.

² Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Puddle Dancer Press, 2015), 3.

³ Ann Weiser Cornell, *The Power of Focusing* (MJF Books, 1996), 10.