

Coming Home to Yourself

A Fast-Track Guide to Inner Child and Parts Work

Based on Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, Somatic Awareness, and Polyvagal Theory

A note before you begin:

This guide draws on established therapeutic frameworks and is written for self-guided personal exploration. It is not a substitute for professional therapy. If at any point material here activates strong distress, please seek support from a qualified practitioner.

Introduction: Why This Work Matters

There are moments when your reaction to something feels bigger than the situation warrants. When you go numb at precisely the moment connection becomes available. When you hear yourself saying or doing something you recognise, not proudly, from a long way back. When a feeling arrives with no obvious cause in the present, but feels strangely familiar, like it has been waiting.

These are not signs that something is wrong with you. They are signs that a younger version of you is still present, still carrying something, still influencing the life you are living now. This guide is about making contact with those younger parts, understanding what they have been carrying, and helping them put it down.

One thing matters to say clearly, before anything else: the patterns you carry were not weaknesses you chose. They were adaptations. A child learns to suppress, to comply, to disappear, to perform, because in their environment, those responses made sense. Sometimes they were the only safe option available. What you are carrying now is not evidence of damage. It is evidence of intelligence, operating under pressure, a long time ago.

Some of what you carry was placed there not by individual failure of care but by conditions larger than your family: poverty, racism, chronic instability, communities under pressure that had nothing left to give. This is worth naming once, plainly, because for some readers it changes the nature of the work entirely. You are not healing a flaw. You are unwinding an adaptation.

The approach here is grounded in three well-researched frameworks: Internal Family Systems therapy, somatic body awareness, and Polyvagal theory. All are introduced in plain language before you are asked to use them. You need no prior knowledge of psychology. You need only a willingness to look inward with curiosity rather than judgement.

And if even that feels difficult right now, if curiosity is hard to access and judgement is what shows up instead, that is fine. This guide will help with that too.

You do not need to complete this guide for it to be useful. Spending weeks with the grounding practice alone would be worthwhile. Meeting one protector and going no further would be worthwhile. There is no failure version of engaging honestly with this material. Begin where you can. Stop when you need to. Return when you are ready.

How to Use This Guide

Move through the sections in order on your first pass. Each builds on the last. Read the foundational sections, particularly the IFS primer and the session-structure guidance, before attempting any exercises. These are not optional background. They are the ground you will be standing on.

You will not be asked to revisit trauma directly. Instead, you will approach your younger parts the way you might approach a frightened animal: slowly, with patience, from a place of steadiness. Some exercises take ten minutes. Others ask you to sit with something for a day before moving on. Follow the pace that feels both honest and manageable.

Breakthrough moments tend to arrive not when we force them, but when we make genuine room.

Important: How to Close a Session Safely

At any point in this guide, during an exercise, mid-reflection, or simply reading, you may find that something arises that feels like too much. This is not a failure. It is the system working.

If you need to stop, do the following:

1. Take three slow breaths, making each exhale longer than the inhale.
2. Press your feet firmly into the floor. Feel the ground beneath you.
3. Look around the room slowly. Name five things you can see.
4. Say quietly, or internally: 'I can come back to this when I am ready. It is safe to stop here.'

Then do something ordinary. Make tea. Go outside. Eat something small. Give your nervous system time to return to neutral before continuing.

If distress persists or you feel unable to settle, please seek support. Details are in the closing pages of this guide.

What is a 'part'?

You will encounter this word throughout the guide. A part is any distinct inner voice, feeling, impulse, or pattern of behaviour that shows up in you, especially under pressure.

You have a part that worries. A part that goes quiet. A part that gets angry or dismissive. A part that tries to keep everyone happy. These are not character flaws. They are inner figures that developed over time, often in childhood, each with a specific job to do.

Your inner child parts, the more vulnerable ones carrying older pain, are typically the most hidden. Around them, protective parts have built walls. The work is not to tear down the walls but to earn the protectors' trust, so they can let you through.

Before You Begin: Understanding IFS

Internal Family Systems therapy was developed in the 1980s by American psychologist Richard Schwartz. It has since become one of the most widely researched therapeutic models in the world, formally recognised as an evidence-based treatment for trauma, depression, and anxiety. This section gives you enough grounding to make the exercises meaningful, not as theory to memorise, but as a map to keep in your hand as you walk.

The Central Idea: You Are Not One Thing

Most therapy traditions assume a person has a single, unified mind. IFS takes a different view: that the human psyche is naturally multiple. You are made of parts, distinct inner voices, feelings, impulses, and perspectives that sometimes pull in completely opposite directions.

You have probably noticed this already. Part of you wants to change something; another part is terrified of changing it. Part of you feels angry; another part immediately feels guilty for feeling angry. Part of you knows something is not good for you; another part cannot seem to stop doing it anyway. This is not weakness, inconsistency, or being broken. It is how minds work.

IFS does not try to silence these parts or get rid of them. It holds that every part has a positive intention, even the ones whose behaviour is harmful or unhelpful. The critical inner voice, the numbing, the compulsive busyness, the explosive anger: these are all strategies that once served a purpose. The goal of IFS is to understand what that purpose was, and to help each part find a better way to fulfil its role now.

The Family Metaphor

Schwartz named the model 'Internal Family Systems' because the inner world operates rather like a family. Parts have relationships with each other. Some are dominant; some are hidden. Some have taken on roles out of necessity, not because they chose them freely, but because someone had to do the job.

When the family system is stressed, the same predictable patterns appear: some members over-function, some go silent, some act out. Just as in a real family, healing does not come from removing the difficult members. It comes from understanding why they behave as they do, and changing the conditions that made those behaviours necessary.

The Self: Your Inner Anchor

At the heart of IFS is the concept of the Self, written with a capital S to distinguish it from the personality or the ego. The Self is the calm, curious, compassionate core that exists underneath all the parts. It is not built through effort or achievement. It is uncovered, and according to Schwartz and subsequent researchers, it is always present, regardless of what a person has been through.

This is one of IFS's most important claims, and for some people, the most challenging. If you have experienced significant trauma, chronic stress, or long periods of feeling utterly lost inside yourself, the idea that a stable, undamaged Self exists beneath it all may feel improbable, even faintly insulting. That response is worth taking seriously. For some people, Self energy has been

so thoroughly covered by protective parts for so long that accessing it takes patient, repeated practice, sometimes over many sessions. The Self has not gone. But the journey to it may be slower for some than for others, and that is not a reflection of anything you did or failed to do.

When you do access Self energy, even partially, you will notice certain qualities: a steadiness, a genuine curiosity about what is happening inside you, a warmth toward the parts that have been difficult. The exercises in this guide are designed to help you find and work from that place.

A common confusion: Self vs. a confident part

Self energy is often mistaken for the feeling of being sorted or in control. They are not the same thing. A confident, capable manager part can feel very assured, but it is still a part, still running a strategy, still afraid of what happens if it fails.

Self energy has a different quality: quieter, more spacious, genuinely interested rather than driven. It does not need to be in control. It is simply present. When you feel it, you tend to know. And if you have never felt it clearly, that is precisely what this work is for.

The Three Roles: A Quick Reference

Parts in IFS fall into three broad roles. You will encounter these terms throughout the guide. The table below gives you a clear picture of each before you meet them in practice.

Role	What they do	Common examples
Managers	Run daily life proactively. Keep vulnerable feelings from surfacing by staying in control of situations and self-presentation.	Inner critic, perfectionist, people-pleaser, worrier, emotional suppressor, over-achiever.
Firefighters	Activate reactively when vulnerable feelings break through. Their job is immediate relief from unbearable pain, at any cost.	Binge eating, substance use, rage, dissociation, compulsive scrolling or spending.
Exiles	Carry the original pain, usually from childhood. Locked away by protectors to prevent their feelings overwhelming the system. The heart of the healing work.	Shame, worthlessness, abandonment, terror, grief, profound longing. Often experienced as a younger version of yourself.

How IFS Relates to Your Inner Child

The inner child is an idea that appears widely in popular psychology, sometimes helpfully, sometimes vaguely. IFS gives it a more precise and workable shape. The inner child is not a

single entity but often several: different younger versions of you, each frozen at the age when something significant happened that they did not have the resources to fully process at the time.

These exile parts are not memories. They are living, active aspects of your inner world, still experiencing what they experienced then, still waiting, still hoping, still afraid. Part of what makes IFS so effective is that it does not ask you to analyse these parts from a distance. It asks you to meet them directly, from the compassionate position of your adult Self.

What a child part most needs is what it did not receive enough of at the time: to be seen, to be believed, to not be left alone with its experience. You, the adult you in Self energy, are often the only one who can provide that now. And when you do, parts that have been frozen for decades can begin, relatively quickly, to move.

Why does this work affect real life?

A common question at this stage: if I am only having an internal conversation, how can it change anything in the real world?

The answer lies in how behaviour is generated. Most habitual responses, the defensiveness, the avoidance, the over-working, the recurring patterns in relationships, are not driven by conscious choice. They are driven by parts running programmes they learned long ago.

When a part's burden is lifted, the behaviour it was driving often changes without effort. The manager that criticised constantly no longer needs to, because the exile it was protecting has been helped. The firefighter that numbed with food or alcohol no longer needs to, because the pain it was extinguishing has been witnessed and released.

This is not magic. It is cause and effect, operating at a level most of us have never had access to before.

One final note before you move into the exercises: the reading itself has not been neutral. Your system has already been responding to the descriptions, the examples, the table, the questions. If anything landed while you were here, a flicker of recognition, a tightening, a memory that surfaced briefly, note it. You can return to it when you reach the exercises. It will still be there.

How to Structure Your Sessions

If you have tried other approaches before this one, weekly therapy, structured programmes, workbooks that trailed off, and they did not reach a conclusion, you are not unusual. And you are not the reason they stopped. Most structured approaches to this kind of work depend on consistent scheduling and sustained momentum over months. When life intervenes, as it does, the gap between sessions widens, the thread is lost, and what began as genuine engagement quietly becomes something you meant to return to. That is a feature of the format, not a reflection of your commitment or capability.

This guide is designed to be picked up and put down without losing structural integrity. Each session is complete in itself. You do not need to have done last week's session to do this week's. The only things you need are the grounding practice at the start and honesty about where you are when you arrive.

Before you begin, it is worth deciding how you will work through this material. The guide is designed to be used in two main ways, and knowing which you are doing helps you prepare properly.

Option A: Short Sessions (20 to 45 minutes)

Work through one section at a time, across several days or weeks. This is the gentler approach and suits people who are new to inner work, have a busy life, or want to let each section settle before moving on.

- Complete one exercise per session.
- Do the grounding practice at the start of every session, even if you feel fine. It is not optional.
- End each session with the closing practice below before returning to daily life.
- Give yourself at least a day between sessions working with exiles.

Option B: The Intensive Session (90 minutes to 2 hours)

If you want to work more deeply in a single sitting, allow yourself a longer, uninterrupted block. This format is best once you are familiar with the grounding and protector work in Parts One through Three.

✦ Exercise: The Intensive Session Format

0 to 15 minutes: Grounding (breathing, feet, body scan). Do not skip this.

15 to 30 minutes: Check which part is most alive. Do not choose; notice which one presents itself.

30 to 60 minutes: Full contact process with a protector (Parts Three and Four).

60 to 75 minutes: Unburdening and protector update (Parts Five and Six).

75 to 90 minutes: Rest. Do nothing. Let the system settle.

(This rest period is as important as the work itself. Do not skip it.)

After the session: move your body if possible. A slow walk works well.
Eat something small. Drink water. Be gentle with yourself for the rest of the day.

Closing Every Session

However long your session, always close it deliberately. Do not simply put the guide down and walk into the day. The nervous system needs a transition.

The Closing Practice (use at the end of every session)

When you are ready to finish:

1. Thank any part you worked with, briefly and sincerely. ('Thank you for showing up. I'll come back.')
- (This will feel unfamiliar at first, possibly even a little strange. That is completely fine. What matters is the genuine intention behind it, not how naturally the words come.)
2. Take three slow breaths.
3. Feel your feet on the floor. Notice the room around you.
4. Drink water. Move gently.

If anything is still activated, any feeling or tension that has not settled, repeat the grounding steps from the Introduction until it eases. Only then return to ordinary activity.

If you need to stop an exercise before completing it, that is always allowed. Use the session-closing steps above, and return when you are ready.

A Note on Frequency

Daily short sessions, even ten minutes of the morning check-in in Part Seven, produce faster integration than occasional long ones. The nervous system learns through repetition and consistency, not intensity. If you can only do one thing, make it the daily check-in.

As you become more fluent with the process, you will find you can move through multiple parts in a single session. Parts often relate to each other: a critic and the exile it is protecting, a firefighter and the pain it is trying to extinguish. Following these relationships tends to produce the most significant movement. Always follow the energy. Work with what feels alive rather than imposing a sequence. The system knows where it most wants to go.

Part One: Arriving — Finding Your Ground

You are already doing this. If you have read attentively to this point, you have already made a kind of contact, with the ideas, with the recognition, with whatever stirred when something on the page landed. The exercises that follow will take you further. But you are not standing outside the work waiting to begin. You are in it.

Before meeting any part of yourself directly, you need access to what IFS calls the Self, the calm, clear, curious core that exists underneath all the noise. You cannot do parts work well from an anxious or defended place. This first section is entirely about helping you arrive there.

1.1 Understanding Your Nervous System

Your nervous system is not a passive bystander in this work. It is the terrain. Polyvagal theory describes three fundamental states your nervous system moves between:

- Ventral Vagal (Safe and Social): You feel present, connected, curious, capable of reflection. This is the state where parts work happens. IFS researchers describe this state as closely aligned with Self energy.
- Sympathetic (Mobilised): You feel anxious, agitated, driven to fix or escape. Parts operating from here are often managers or firefighters, busy, vigilant, controlling.
- Dorsal Vagal (Shut Down): You feel numb, blank, heavy, disconnected. Parts here are often deeply buried exiles, or protectors that learned to make everything go quiet.

The key insight: you cannot think your way into Self energy. You must arrive in your body first.

A note that matters: for some people, the grounding exercises that follow do not produce the expected settling. If you breathe slowly, feel your feet, and nothing shifts, this does not mean you are doing it wrong. It may mean your nervous system has learned, with very good reason, not to trust signals of safety. This is not a failure. It is information about how much your system has needed to stay guarded. Be patient with the exercises. Do them anyway. The practice still matters, even when the effect is not yet obvious.

◆ Exercise: Finding Your Feet

Sit or stand comfortably. Close your eyes, or lower your gaze softly to a spot on the floor in front of you.

Feel your feet on the floor. Press them gently down.

Notice the weight of your body in the chair or against the ground. Just notice. No need to change anything.

Take three slow breaths, making the exhale slightly longer than the inhale.

(This activates the vagal brake, a physiological signal of safety.)

Notice: is there a slight settling anywhere in your body? A small release of tension?

This, even a flicker of it, is the beginning of Self energy.

Write anything you notice, however small:

If you're finding this difficult...

If settling feels impossible, if you feel numb, jittery, or just blank, that is important information, not a failure. It means a protective part is on high alert. You do not need to push past it. Just notice it, name it ('there is a part of me that feels...'), and continue breathing. The exercise still worked.

1.2 The 8 C's of Self Energy

IFS identifies eight qualities that characterise Self energy. When you feel any of these, even mildly, you are in territory where parts work becomes possible:

- Curiosity: a genuine interest in what is happening inside you
- Calm: a background steadiness, even if a part is distressed
- Clarity: a sense of seeing things as they actually are
- Compassion: warmth toward your own suffering
- Confidence: a quiet sense that you can handle what arises
- Creativity: flexible thinking, not locked in old patterns
- Courage: willingness to turn toward what has been avoided
- Connectedness: a felt sense of belonging, to yourself and others

You do not need all eight. One is enough to begin.

◆ **Exercise: Your C-Check**

Look at the list above. Which of these qualities do you have at least a small amount of right now?

Note any that feel even faintly present.

If none feel available, return to the breathing exercise and try again.

If still none: which one do you most want to feel? That longing is a thread. Follow it.

My C that feels most present today: _____

My C that I most want more of: _____

Part Two: Mapping Your Inner System

Before you can work with your parts, it helps to know who is there. This section creates a working map of your inner system, not a permanent diagram, but a living sketch that will evolve as the work deepens.

If you have been holding this at arm's length up to now, reading carefully but not quite letting it land, that is fine. This is where it tends to get personal.

2.1 The Three Types of Parts

You encountered the three roles, Managers, Firefighters, and Exiles, in the IFS Primer. Here we make them more personal: not abstract categories, but recognisable patterns in your own life.

Managers

Managers run the day-to-day show. They plan, worry, strive, please, control, and criticise, all in an attempt to keep things safe and functioning. They are often the first parts you encounter, because they are the most visible. They are not villains. They are exhausted executives who have been running the operation for years without a break.

Common manager patterns: perfectionism, people-pleasing, over-working, intellectualising, emotional suppression, constant planning, harsh self-criticism.

Firefighters

Firefighters activate in emergency, when an exile's pain breaks through despite the managers' efforts. Their job is to put out the fire fast, by any means necessary. They often operate through urges: to eat, drink, scroll, rage, or disappear. They are not trying to harm you. They are trying to stop the unbearable from being felt.

Common firefighter patterns: binge behaviours, explosive anger, dissociation, sudden overwhelm, compulsive distraction.

Exiles

Exiles are the younger, more vulnerable parts that carry the original pain, the shame, fear, grief, or loneliness from early experiences. Managers and firefighters work hard to keep exiles locked away, because their feelings can overwhelm the whole system. Healing the exiles is the heart of this work, but we approach them only after the protectors have given permission.

Common exile feelings: worthlessness, abandonment, terror, profound shame, longing to be seen and known.

2.2 Drawing Your Map

✦ Exercise: Parts Inventory

Take a blank page and write 'ME' in the centre.

Around it, begin writing down any parts you can identify. Do not think too hard. Let them surface.

Prompts to help parts emerge:

- *What do I do when I'm stressed that I sometimes regret?*
- *What do I feel I can never say out loud?*
- *What do I work hardest to avoid feeling?*
- *What part of me shows up that I don't really like?*
- *What feelings have I had since childhood that I still don't quite understand?*

For each part that emerges, note:

Its name or rough description (e.g. 'the worrier', 'the numb one', 'the people-pleaser')

Where you sense it in your body, if you can

Whether it feels more like a Manager, Firefighter, or Exile, or you're not sure yet

There are no wrong answers. Six parts is fine. Twenty is fine. One is fine.

If you're finding this difficult...

If you draw a complete blank, this is common, and it is meaningful. It usually means a strong manager is keeping the lid on. Rather than pushing, try asking: 'Is there a part of me that doesn't want me to do this work?' That part often shows up immediately. Start there.

2.3 Choosing Your Focus

For the purposes of this guide, we will focus on one thread at a time. Trying to work on everything at once is itself a manager strategy, a way of staying in control by spreading attention too thin. Real change most often happens through one clear contact, followed by another.

✦ Exercise: Choosing Your Focus

Look at your map. Which part feels most present in your daily life right now?

Not necessarily the most painful. The most present. The one that has been showing up recently.

Name it here: _____

Describe it in a sentence or two. What does it do? When does it show up?

Where do you sense it in your body? (A pressure, tightness, or absence of feeling?)

Part Three: Making Contact — Meeting a Part

This is the heart of the work. Everything before was preparation. Now you turn, gently, with curiosity, toward the part you identified.

The crucial shift IFS asks of you: instead of being the part, which is what usually happens, you get flooded by it, become it, lose perspective, you observe it. You become the compassionate witness. This is not distance or detachment. It is presence from a secure place.

The goal is not to get rid of the part. It is to understand what it has been carrying, and to let it know it does not have to carry it alone any more.

Before You Begin: Are You Within Your Window?

The window of tolerance is the zone in which your nervous system can process difficult material without flooding or shutting down. Before starting any contact exercise, take sixty seconds to check where you are.

Ask yourself these three questions:

1. Do I feel reasonably present and grounded right now?
2. Is there a quality of curiosity or steadiness available, even a small amount?
3. Is what I am feeling right now something I can observe, rather than be swept away by?

If yes to all three: proceed.

If uncertain: do the grounding exercise from Part One first, then check again.

If no: close the session. Use the closing practice. Return another day.

Being outside the window is not a moral failing. It is a physiological state. States change. Returning when you are ready is not giving up. It is the work.

3.1 The Six-Step Contact Process

IFS uses a six-step sequence to guide contact with any part. Each step matters, and each one opens something the previous one prepared. Work through them slowly. This is not a checklist to complete but a conversation to have.

1. Find: Locate where in your body you sense the part.
2. Focus: Bring your gentle attention to that place.
3. Flesh Out: Let the part become more vivid. Does it have a colour, shape, texture, age, or emotional tone?
4. Feel Toward: Notice how you feel toward it right now. Curious? Afraid? Irritated? This is information about your relationship with the part, not a judgement.
5. Befriend: Begin to build a relationship. Not fixing. Just being with it.

6. Ask About Fears: Ask what the part is afraid would happen if it stopped doing its job. This is often where the real story lives.

3.2 Working Through the Steps

✦ Exercise: The First Meeting

Return to the part you named in the previous exercise. Get comfortable, feet on the floor, a few slow breaths.

FIND: Close your eyes, or lower your gaze softly to a spot on the floor. Scan your body. Where is this part? Even a faint pull or pressure counts.

Body location: _____

FOCUS: Place your attention there, the way you might place a hand gently on a shoulder. Just let the part know you see it. Do not try to change anything yet.

FLESH OUT: Let an image come, if one will.

(It might be a colour, a figure, an age, an object, a creature. Anything is valid.)

What I notice or what comes: _____

FEEL TOWARD: How do you feel toward this part right now?

(Honest. Even if the answer is 'slightly irritated' or 'I don't know'.)

I feel: _____

- If what you feel is not curious or compassionate, another part has stepped in.
- Ask that part if it would be willing to step back, just for a few minutes.
- Then return and try again.

If you're finding this difficult...

A very common sticking point: 'I don't see anything. I just feel blank.'

Try this: 'If this part did have a shape or colour, what might it be?' The hypothetical often unlocks something. Or simply stay with the body sensation. The sensation itself is the contact. You do not need an image.

Another common sticking point: 'I feel critical of this part. I want it to stop.'

That is a different part speaking, often a manager who is tired of the one in question. Acknowledge it: 'I see you. I'll come back to you.' Usually it will step back, at least briefly.

✦ **Exercise: Befriending and the Fear Question**

Once you feel some genuine curiosity or warmth, even a small amount, continue:

BEFRIEND: Internally, or quietly out loud, say something like:

'I see you. I'm not here to get rid of you. I just want to understand.'

Notice: does anything shift, even slightly?

What shifts (if anything): _____

ASK ABOUT FEARS: Ask the part: 'What are you most afraid would happen if you stopped doing what you do?'

Take your time. The answer may come as words, an image, a feeling, or a memory.

What comes: _____

→ *This answer is often where the real story begins. Take a moment to acknowledge what it told you.*

Part Four: Going Deeper — The Exile Beneath

Most active protectors, managers and firefighters, are working to keep an exile safe from exposure. Once a protector trusts you enough to stand aside, it becomes possible to approach the deeper layer: the younger part carrying the original burden.

Before You Continue: A Note on Pace

This section is where the most significant material tends to live, and where it is most important to move slowly.

If you have just completed Part Three in the same session, consider pausing here. Drink some water, move around, and return when you feel settled rather than driven.

If you feel a pull to rush, to get to the exile, to fix things quickly, notice that pull. It is almost certainly a part. There is no urgency. The exile has been waiting a long time. It can wait a little longer while you arrive properly.

If at any point you feel flooded, overwhelmed by feeling rather than present with it, stop. Use the session-closing steps from the opening of this guide. You can return to this section in a later session.

And if, when you do make contact, the exile feels too large to approach directly, step back. You can work at the edge of the exile rather than inside it (approaching gradually, from the protector's position, rather than moving directly into the exile's experience). Spend more time with the protector. Ask what else it needs before it can fully trust this. The exile will still be there when you return, and the protector's fuller trust will make the contact cleaner when you do.

4.1 Getting the Protector's Permission

This step is non-negotiable in IFS. Attempting to reach an exile by bypassing its protector creates conflict in the internal system, and protectors pushed aside tend to return more forcefully. Instead, you earn the protector's trust first.

✦ Exercise: Permission Conversation

Return to the protector part you have been working with.

Thank it, sincerely, for what it has been doing. However difficult its behaviour, it has been trying to help.

Say internally or aloud: 'Thank you for protecting me. I understand why you've been doing this. I'd like to meet the part you've been protecting, not to expose it or make things worse, but to help it. Would you be willing to let me try?'

Notice the response. It may feel like a softening, a sense of 'yes'.

Or it may feel like a 'not yet', a tightening, or renewed activation of the protector's energy.

Both are valid. If it is 'not yet', stay longer with the protector. Ask what it needs from you before it can trust this.

Response I noticed: _____

4.2 Meeting the Exile

If you have the protector's permission, you can now turn toward the exile. This is often where the most significant movement happens, sometimes in just a few minutes of genuine contact.

✦ Exercise: First Contact with an Exile

Close your eyes, or lower your gaze softly to the floor. Ask to sense the part the protector has been guarding.

Let an image, feeling, or impression come. Often this is a younger version of you, a child at a specific age, in a specific place. Or it may be more abstract: a heavy feeling, a small light, a cold stillness.

What do you sense or see? _____

If a younger self appears: how old do they seem?

Age: _____ Setting or context (if any): _____

Notice: how does this young part seem right now? What is their expression or feeling tone?

If you're finding this difficult...

If you feel suddenly overwhelmed, a wave of sadness, fear, or grief, this is normal. A part has stopped managing the feeling. Pause and breathe. Remind yourself: 'I am not this feeling. I am the one witnessing it.' If it helps, imagine stepping slightly back from the scene, watching from a gentle distance rather than being inside it.

If nothing comes at all: stay with the quality of the blankness. Sometimes 'nothing' is itself a part, one so used to being unseen that it does not yet believe anyone is genuinely looking.

4.3 Witnessing and Validation

The most powerful thing you can offer an exile is what it never received: to be seen, believed, and not left alone with its experience. You do not need to fix the past. You need to be a witness to it.

✦ **Exercise: Witnessing the Exile**

Once you can sense the exile, ask it to show you what it has been living with, what it most needs you to understand.

It may show you a memory, a feeling, a word, or a belief it formed about itself.

The most common exile beliefs include: 'I am too much.' 'I am not enough.' 'I am alone.' 'It was my fault.' 'I am not loveable.'

What does this part want you to know? _____

Now: let the exile know that you see what it has been carrying. That you believe it.

That it makes complete sense that it felt what it felt.

That it was not its fault.

That it is not alone any more.

You can do this in words said internally, or simply by directing compassion toward it.

Take as long as this needs.

What happens when you offer this? What do you notice in the exile, and in your own body?

Part Five: The Unburdening

When genuine contact has been made and the exile feels truly seen, something becomes possible that IFS calls the unburdening: the release of the beliefs, feelings, or roles the exile has been carrying. This is the transformational core of the model.

Unburdening does not always feel dramatic. Sometimes it is quiet, like a slow exhale. Sometimes it feels like a lifting. Sometimes it is accompanied by tears, or laughter, or simply a sense of 'oh.' It cannot be forced. It can only be invited.

Sometimes, as something moves, the body responds. Shaking, trembling, a sudden urge to push or run or breathe deeply, an unexpected wave of tears from somewhere low and old: these are not signs that something has gone wrong. They are signs of the nervous system completing what it could not complete at the time. If this happens, allow it gently. Do not suppress it and do not chase it. When it passes, use the closing practice to settle. Then rest.

5.1 Inviting the Unburdening

✦ Exercise: The Release

Once the exile feels seen and no longer alone, ask it:

'Is there something you've been carrying, a belief, a feeling, a role, that you would be willing to let go of?'

Wait. Do not push. This is an invitation, not an instruction.

If a 'yes' comes, in any form, ask the exile what it would like to release.

What would it let go of? _____

IFS often invites the exile to release the burden into one of the elements: light, water, earth, fire, air, whichever feels right. Invite this if it feels natural. Let the part choose its own way.

Some burdens need multiple visits before they fully release. That is completely normal.

Note what happened:

5.2 What the Exile Now Needs

After an unburdening, or even after a meaningful moment of contact that does not yet lead to unburdening, ask what the exile needs. Not what it needed then. What it needs now, from you.

✦ Exercise: The New Relationship

Ask the exile: 'What do you need from me going forward? How can I be different in my relationship with you?'

Common exile needs: to be checked in on regularly; to be allowed to feel without being shut down; to be included rather than hidden; to play, to rest, to be told they are safe now.

What this part needs from me: _____

Make a concrete, small commitment to this. Not a grand gesture. Something realistic.

My commitment: _____

Part Six: Informing the Protectors

One of the most commonly missed steps in self-guided parts work is this: after working with an exile, you must return to the protectors and let them know what happened.

Protectors have often been doing their job for decades. They do not automatically know that things have changed, because no one told them they were allowed to stand down. Without this step, they often continue as before, not out of stubbornness, but because the message never arrived.

✦ Exercise: The Protector Update

Return to the protector you worked with earlier. Let it know what happened with the exile.

Tell it: 'The part you've been guarding has been heard. It's been helped. It doesn't need protecting in the same way any more.'

Ask the protector: 'Now that the exile has been helped, what would you like to do differently?'

And: 'Is there a role you'd rather have, if you weren't needed to guard?'

Protectors, when released from their defensive role, often reveal a very different nature.

A fierce inner critic might want to become an honest, caring advisor. A numbing part might want to become quiet steadiness.

What does the protector want to become? _____

If you're finding this difficult...

If the protector does not believe the exile is really okay, if it stays guarded, go back. Check whether the exile feels truly seen, or whether there is more to hear. Protectors are often accurate in their assessment. If they are still on guard, there is usually a reason worth exploring.

Part Seven: Integration — Making the Changes Stick

Insight without integration can evaporate. The nervous system learns through repetition, through new experiences that contradict old expectations, not through one magnificent session, though that session matters enormously.

Integration does not have to be slow. But it does have to be embodied and consistent. The practices in this section are designed for daily life, not for sessions alone.

7.1 The Settling Period — What Happens Between Sessions

After any session where genuine contact has been made, with a protector, an exile, or even just your own capacity to feel something, the work continues in the hours and days that follow. This is not a metaphor. The nervous system is still processing, still reorganising, still adjusting to a change in what it believed was true.

This period can feel like a number of things. Some people feel a low-level grief or flatness, not distress exactly, but a kind of thawing. Some feel lighter, almost spacious, in a way that seems disproportionate to what happened. Some feel nothing at first, and then something shifts three days later while they are doing something ordinary. All of these are normal. None of them mean something has gone wrong. In fact, the ones that feel most unsettling are often signs that something has gone most right.

What the settling period might feel like

In the hours after a significant session, it is common to notice one or more of the following:

A low-level sadness or grief, not overwhelming, but present. Old feelings surfacing briefly as they move toward release.

Unusual tiredness. The nervous system has done real work; rest is appropriate.

A sense of something being slightly different, without being able to say what. This is integration happening below the level of thought.

Heightened sensitivity, to other people, to beauty, to ordinary moments. This is the Self becoming more available.

Temporary return of a part's activation, feeling the old anxiety or numbness again. This is not regression. It is the system testing whether the change is real.

Be gentle with yourself during this period. Avoid filling the space too quickly.

The settling is the work. What happens between sessions is not waiting — it is integration in progress.

7.2 The Daily Check-in

The single most effective integration practice is brief, regular contact with your parts, not deep therapeutic sessions, but simple acknowledgement. This trains the system that parts will be heard before they feel the need to escalate.

✦ **Exercise: The One-Minute Morning Check-in**

Each morning, before the day accelerates, pause for sixty seconds.

Ask internally: 'How are my parts today? Is anyone carrying something?'

Notice whatever arises, even if it is just a tone or texture of feeling.

Acknowledge it: 'I see you. I'll tend to you when I can.'

This is a more radical act than it sounds. Most of us have spent years ignoring parts until they become unavoidable.

Consistent acknowledgement, even this brief, reorganises the internal system over time.

7.3 When Parts Flare Up Again

After this work, parts will still activate. They will still flare under stress. This is normal and expected. It does not mean the work has not taken. The difference now is what you can do with it.

The PACE Response

When a part activates during daily life, try PACE:

P: Pause. Just one breath before reacting.

A: Acknowledge. 'A part of me is feeling...'

C: Curiosity. 'I wonder what this is about?'

E: Ease. Offer the part a small gesture of care before continuing.

This does not require ten minutes. It can happen in thirty seconds, walking between rooms, driving, making tea. The practice is not the duration. It is the orientation.

7.4 Somatic Anchoring

One of the fastest routes to integration is through the body, because parts are held somatically as much as cognitively. Giving your nervous system new, positive physical experiences associated with the work helps make the changes more durable.

◆ **Exercise: The Self-Touch Anchor**

Think of the exile you worked with, or the quality of being in Self energy.
Place one hand on your chest, over your heart.

Take three slow breaths, letting each exhale be long and deliberate.
Internally, say to the exile or the whole system: 'I'm here. You are not alone.'

Repeat this gesture whenever you need to reconnect: before a difficult conversation, in a moment of self-criticism, when a part flares.

The body learns associations quickly. This simple gesture, practised regularly, becomes a reliable route back to Self energy.

7.5 Tracking Your Progress

Progress in parts work rarely looks like a straight line. It tends to look more like a spiral: you return to similar themes, but from a slightly different and more resourced place each time. Learning to recognise this prevents discouragement when familiar feelings resurface.

◆ **Exercise: The Weekly Reflection (Return to this weekly)**

Date: _____

Which parts have been most present this week?

Were there moments where you responded differently than you usually would?

Is there a part that needs more attention this week?

What has felt different, even subtly, since beginning this work?

Closing: You Are Already Whole

One of the foundational claims of IFS, one that accumulating research continues to support, is that there is no fundamentally damaged core self. The Self is always present. It has never been broken, no matter what happened. It has only been covered by parts doing their very best to protect it.

This work is not about becoming someone new. It is about coming home to who you have always been.

People who do this work, genuinely, at depth, tend to find that it changes not only their relationship with themselves but the quality of their presence with others. The way they listen shifts. The way they respond to someone in distress shifts. Something that was defended becomes available. Whether you are a parent, a partner, a writer, a teacher, or simply a person trying to live more honestly, that change in quality of presence matters, and it is felt by the people around you.

Wholeness, once contacted, is not a destination you arrive at and hold. It is a relationship with yourself, one that must be tended and renewed. There is no finish line here. There is only the ongoing practice of turning toward what is happening inside you with curiosity rather than suppression, with care rather than judgement. That is the whole of it. And it is enough.

You can't go back and give yourself the childhood you deserved. But you can be the person now who shows up for that child, gently, honestly, consistently. That is the whole of the work.

A Note on Professional Support

This guide is written for self-guided exploration and draws on established therapeutic frameworks. It is not a substitute for professional support. If at any point during this work you experience significant distress, intrusive memories, or feel that material is arising that is beyond what you can manage alone, please seek support from a qualified therapist, ideally one trained in IFS or trauma-informed approaches.

In the UK, support is available through the BACP therapist directory at bacp.co.uk, through your GP, and through the Samaritans at 116 123 if distress becomes acute. The IFS Institute directory at ifs-institute.com lists practitioners trained specifically in this model.

For readers who find the body dimension of this work opens something they want to explore more fully, somatic approaches such as Somatic Experiencing, EMDR, and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy are natural extensions of what this guide begins. These are not crisis interventions. They are the next depth of the same territory.

Further Reading

The following books are recommended for different reasons. Choose based on where you are:

- No Bad Parts, Richard Schwartz. The most accessible introduction to IFS for non-clinicians. Read this first if you want to go deeper into the model before continuing the exercises.
- Self-Therapy, Jay Earley. A structured, step-by-step self-help guide to IFS. More detailed than this guide; useful for those who want more scaffolding.
- Somatic Internal Family Systems Therapy, Susan McConnell. For readers who want to explore the body-based dimensions of this work more fully.
- The Body Keeps the Score, Bessel van der Kolk. Foundational reading on trauma and the body. Widely read and highly valuable, but be aware that it can be activating for people who have experienced significant trauma. Read it when you feel resourced, not as a starting point.
- Anchored, Deb Dana. The most practical and readable introduction to Polyvagal Theory for daily life. Gentle, clear, and immediately applicable.
- The Myth of Normal, Gabor Maté. For readers who found the paragraph about systemic and relational origins of wounding in the Introduction significant. Maté examines the social and cultural conditions that generate trauma, setting individual healing within a wider context. Challenging and important.
- Waking the Tiger, Peter Levine. A landmark text on how the body holds and releases trauma. Particularly useful for readers who found the somatic responses in Part Five significant.
- IFS Institute: ifs-institute.com. Online resources, research library, and a directory of trained practitioners worldwide.