



Conscious Life presents

Moving Beyond Inner Defenses

Guest: Dr Richard Schwartz

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview, where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Richard Schwartz. We're going to be talking about his very important body of work on Internal Family Systems, with a particular focus towards those protective, defensive places inside of us.

If one of the things that you found on your trauma healing journey is, as you start to get close to doing the real healing work, you find things get locked up or get defensive, it's going to be a really helpful interview to understand why that happens, and how to work with that.

To give you a little bit of background Richard Schwartz, PhD, is the creator of Internal Family Systems, a highly effective evidence based therapeutic model that depathologizes that multi part personality. His IFS Institute offers training for professionals and the general public.

He is currently on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and has published five books, including *No Bad Parts, Healing Trauma & Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model*.

Dick lives with his wife Jean near Chicago, close to his three daughters and his growing number of grandchildren. Firstly, Dick, welcome and thank you for making the time to have this conversation together.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Happy to do it, Alex, and congratulations on all your success.

Alex Howard

Thank you, I appreciate it, I should say likewise, because everyone I talk to these days is talking about IFS, which is a wonderful thing to witness. For the probably very few people that are listening to this conversation that aren't familiar with Internal Family Systems. Do you want to give us a little bit of an introduction to what the IFS framework is?

[00:02:03] Dr Richard Schwartz

Sure, the basic assumptions, and they're not really assumptions as much as what I discovered from clients as I went on this journey. The first one is that the mind is quite multiple, that there are all these what I call parts, other systems call ego states, or internal objects, or subpersonalities that constitute our minds.

And that, at least for my exploration, that's a good thing because all of them are valuable, they have wonderful qualities to help us in our life, resources. But, and this is relevant to this topic, trauma and what we call attachment injuries, or bad parenting, and the swings and arrows that you encounter in your life, force them out of their naturally valuable states into roles that can be damaging, and can create symptoms.

Again through trial and error over many years, my clients were talking about these parts. I started asking questions about... My background is as a family therapist. I was trying to see how they all related to each other inside.

That's a lot of what I was learning, that they aren't what they seem, and that the mistake that most of us make is to try to get rid of, or fight with the parts that give you trouble. Instead of going to them and getting to know why they're in these roles, and help them out of those roles.

Parts, there are no bad ones. That's the title of my most recent book, *No Bad Parts*. But they do cause us problems when they're stuck in the past, because trauma has a way of freezing them in time during the trauma. And also injecting them with what I call burdens, which are these extreme beliefs and emotions that came into our system during the trauma, and then attach to them and drive the way they operate, almost like a virus.

So good parts forced into extreme roles, burdened with extreme beliefs and emotions, and frozen in the past, such that if I were to have you ask one of your parts how old it thought you were, you'd get a single digit most of the time. They really think you're still living in that danger, and they need to protect you in the way they did back then. Some of them do become what we call Protectors, they're forced into these protective roles.

Others we call Exiles because those are the parts that before they got hurt, other systems we call these inner children, that are innocent. And before they got hurt, playful, and creative, and joyful. But they're also the most sensitive parts of us. So that when they get hurt, or terrified, or shamed somehow they start picking up those particular burdens.

And they then have the power to overwhelm us, and make us feel like we are worthless, or we are terrified, or we are whatever they're carrying, whatever burden they're carrying. And because of that, not realizing that they're these little young parts thinking, we're just moving on from the trauma, we tend to lock them away inside in an inner basement, and try our best to stay away from those feelings and memories.

Thinking that we're moving on, and we're not going to look back, and we're going to go on with our life, but we're leaving these precious qualities in the dust that way, and then we don't have access to those qualities anymore either. So it's insult to injury to these Exiles, the injury was the trauma, and the insult is our abandonment of them.

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And when you have a bunch of Exiles, you feel a lot more delicate and the world seems a lot more dangerous, because so many things could trigger them, and do trigger them. And so you have to have other parts that are forced out of their naturally valuable states to become Protectors.

And they start to protect by managing your life so that things don't trigger those Exiles. They might manage your relationships, so no one gets close enough to hurt you again, or manage your appearance so that you don't get rejected, or manage your performance, so you get accolades to counter the worthlessness.

Or some of them become the inner critics inside because they're yelling at you to try to get you to look better, or behave better, or they might be yelling at you so you don't try to get out in the world, and you stay small and stay safe that way.

So there's a lot of different, what we call, Manager Protectors. What they have in common is the desire to preempt anything that might trigger the Exiles. They're also generally interested in pleasing people, and keeping you safe that way, and also controlling your inner life and your external life. Some of them will make it so you don't feel much in your body, for example.

A lot of them are what we call the ego in general, they're the parts of you that are around all the time, and they try their best, but the world has a way of breaking through those defenses, those defensive parts, and triggering your Exiles. At which point it's a big emergency, because it's like these flames of raw emotion are going to pull you back into those scenes, and overwhelm you, and make it till you can't function.

There's another set of parts that immediately go into action, another set of Protectors to get you away from that, and to maybe douse it with some substance, or get you higher than the flames, or distract you until they burn themselves out. And these, what we call, Firefighter Protectors, tend to be impulsive, reactive. They don't care about the collateral damage to your body, to your family. They just want to get you out of there before you die, they think.

So that's the simple map of this inner territory. Protectors, Managers and Firefighters under that rubric, trying to contain and protect the Exiles. Most of us have had some kind of trauma, and so we have some version of that system. But the big discovery, as I was exploring all this, is that in addition to all these parts, there's a kind of essence to us that I came to call the Self.

That when the parts separate and open, and relax, an open space pops out immediately and spontaneously, and contains these wonderful, what we call C word qualities, like calm, confidence, creativity, compassion, clarity, courage, connectedness. And I think I missed one, there are eight of them.

That's the big discovery of IFS, that in addition to these parts, there is this inner leader who they can learn to trust. Who can run their inner world and external world and knows how to heal, knows how to go to these parts in a healing way, and knows how to heal external relationships also. And is just beneath the surface of these parts so that when they open space, that Self pops out.

So in doing the work, if I were working with you, Alex, I would say, okay, let's get to know some of these Protectors first. You might want to work with a critic. So I would have you, okay, focus on that critic, how do you feel toward it? I hate it because it calls me names all day. Could we ask the

part who hates it to give us a little space to get to know it and see why it does that? Maybe help it not do that. Okay, now, how do you feel about it? I'm just curious about why it calls me names.

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So suddenly simply by getting this other one to pull its energy out, you access curiosity. You're also calm relative to it, confident relative to it, and you might even say, I feel sorry for it, out of the blue. That means that we have access to your Self. And when you're in that state, the conversation with the critic will go well, and it'll share its secret history of how it got forced into being the critic, and how much it doesn't like it. That's a brief overview.

Alex Howard

I think one of the frames that's implicit in what you're talking about, which I know is an important piece of IFS, is that these parts, even if we may experience them as being problematic, or we experience the tension with them, that they're ultimately acting in our interests.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Yeah. Like I said, they think you're still quite young and maybe in the middle of the trauma, and they need to protect you in the way they did back then. They haven't caught up to the fact that you're a man, and much more capable than you were when it happened to you as a child.

They're just misunderstood by our culture and by our psychotherapies. Such that many Protector parts, people try to get rid of, or fight with, and that just makes them stronger. Because they think, you don't get it, if I stop doing this you're going to die, or something terrible is going to happen. And that's writ large in the culture. That's a big problem in our world is that we try to attack these Firefighters around the world as well.

Alex Howard

One of the places that I wanted to spend our time exploring and, well, first let me say what it is, in a way you're describing is those Protector parts, and in a broader definition that the defensive structures that we can have within us.

I think for a lot of people when they start to do their trauma healing work, there can be this initial gusto and enthusiasm, and then they start to turn towards themselves. And what they hit is these places of defensiveness and protection that's happening. And that can be obviously incredibly draining because one looks like an inner civil war, one's fighting with themselves.

Maybe you can say a bit more about the purpose of that protection or that defense, and then we can explore a bit more how we might approach it differently.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Early in my career as I was getting to know these inner systems, and clients came to me with traumas and they would say, there's this pain in my gut, or there's this fear in my chest. It seemed like that was what we needed to heal. So I would encourage them to go to those places, and there would be this huge resistance, and either they would be distracted, or attack me or something. Or

we would succeed and we would spend time in that pain, or that fear, and there would be a big backlash.

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Clearly a backlash reaction after the session, I had clients leave my office and get into an accident, claim they just didn't see the car, or spike a 102 fever suddenly out of the blue. At some point I started putting two and two together. What I learned the hard way, is that these Protectors really, really fear letting you go to these Exiles. I was barging in and just going to these raw places, without permission from the Protectors that had spent decades trying to keep the client away from them.

I learned to work with Protectors first, so if a client comes to me with a trauma, they say, I've got this emotional pain that drives me crazy. I'd say, we'll get to that, but first I want to talk to the parts that don't want us anywhere near that, or are afraid to let us go there.

As you think about going there, what kind of fear comes up? And then we'll focus on that fear, and there's a set protocol for helping these Protectors trust that it's safe to open that door. And there's I think eight or nine common Protector fears about going to Exiles. Now over the years, we've learned how to address those fears.

I'm what I call a hope merchant. I'm coming to these hopeless systems and saying, I know you don't think it's possible to heal that, and that's why you're keeping it all contained. And I know other times when you open the door she's been overwhelmed by all this pain, and so you're determined to never let that happen again. But there is a way to go and open that door, and not be overwhelmed, and heal the pain. I promise we can do that.

That's hard for a lot of therapists to say because we've all been trained to never promise anything to our clients. But unless you come with a lot of confidence, these Protectors aren't going to do it. We negotiate, and I'll say to them, we're not going there without your permission. And when you respect Protectors to that degree, they're much more inclined.

And the key also is for me, the therapist, to be in that Self place and those eight C qualities as I do it. I'm not trying to manipulate the Protectors, they get this clarity that I'm really sincere in respecting them, and honoring them, and that I have the confidence to actually pull this off. What's seen as resistance is the actually correct and rightful position that a lot of these parts have given where they're sitting in the past, and given the consequences of opening the door in the past.

Alex Howard

It strikes me that when you're talking to the client, in a way you're not necessarily talking so much to the client, you're talking to the part which you're working with. The building rapport and trust there is actually more important.

Dr Richard Schwartz

At any time the client comes into your office, their Protectors are looking through their eyes, they're really checking you out, and scoping you out, and seeing if you waiver in your confidence, or seeing if any of your parts are around that they have to worry about. When I start to speak, I'm talking to the client, but those Protectors are focused intently on me to see how safe it is.

[00:18:07] Alex Howard

They're performing their function, as much as they can be a frustration to the client, they're actually doing their job well.

Dr Richard Schwartz

They're doing their job, and often they're doing it in an extreme way because they don't know that you're safe now, and they think they still have to protect you the way they did. So that's one of the real negatives of after post trauma is that much of you still lives as if you're still back there.

Alex Howard

Someone that's watching this interview, that's maybe at that point that we're particularly speaking to, where they're starting to realize that to really work with the history, and with the emotional pain, there's some things which are protecting that place. How do they start to work with that? Obviously part of the recommendation here, rightly so, is working with a skilled practitioner, ideally someone that's IFS trained. But for someone that's starting to play with this in their own experience, what would be some of the ways to do that?

Dr Richard Schwartz

We have meditations around that, but if you want to get to know a know a Protector, if I were working with you, Alex, I would say, again, focus on that fear of letting you go to this raw place, find it in your body, and most people can do that pretty readily.

Then I would ask how you feel toward it? I would ask you to get to a point where you could open your mind to it, so that you could get curious and ask questions. And then I would have you direct the questions to that place in your body, so that you're not thinking of the answers, you're just hearing back from that part and the questions.

Then I would say, ask this Protector what it wants you to know about itself, don't think, just wait and see what comes. You might hear, you're not safe, shouldn't do this. Then ask what it's afraid would happen if it didn't do this protective thing, if it didn't interfere, or make you scared all the time? You would hear, if I didn't do this you would feel the pain, or if I didn't distract all the time, or you might get access to this rage that would hurt somebody.

That question asks the Protector what it's afraid would happen if it didn't do this job, by answering that you're learning what it's protecting. And once you learn how desperately it's been trying to protect you, I would say, Alex, send some appreciation to it for at least trying to keep you safe that way. Which these Protectors love to be appreciated because they've been vilified and hated for years, and that would soften the Protector.

And then a question like, ask if you could heal or change what it's been protecting so it was liberated, it was freed from this role, what might it like to do instead? And often it's the opposite of the role it's been in. Like the scared parts want to help you have courage to be in the world, so then we can reassure it. That's where we're headed, we're trying to free you up to be who you're designed to be.

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To do that, we need to go to these places that you've been blocking so that we can heal that, and that would free you up, so in that sense I'm a systems thinker. You can't go right to one part and expect it to change. You have to learn about the network that it's involved in and often have to start somewhere far away, and then come back to it to free it up.

Alex Howard

What if the defensive or protective mechanism is showing up in such a way of, I don't want to talk to this part, or I don't have what it takes, or it's not possible for this to change? How does one start to create the space where things can actually start to open up if the protection is almost in the way of the work?

Dr Richard Schwartz

That's a little harder to do on your own, those kinds of objections. That's where I come in, I'll say, I get you don't think that you can do it, or that it's not possible, but I promise that it is. I've done this thousands of times and I know how to do it safely, and I'm not going to be judging you, I'm going to be supporting you no matter where we go in there. So again, I'm just a kind of hope merchant, selling hope to these Protectors who feel totally hopeless. And if you don't want to do it, we're not going to do it, but just know that it's all possible, and you could be liberated from this role. That's a very seductive pitch. On your own, it's really tough with those kinds of parts.

Alex Howard

As we start to honor, and understand, and work with those defensive places, I think sometimes what can happen is that at that initial level, although it's tricky, there's a familiarity to those places. Sometimes I think we move beyond those places, in a way what they've been protecting is parts, or places, that feel even more tricky, or more vulnerable, or delicate. I'd be interested to hear you speak to that transition and how we then meet those places.

Dr Richard Schwartz

The Protectors will also say, why would we want to go there? That's a horrible feeling and I sworn that I'll never let you feel that again. It's got a point, every time that's been triggered, that has been horrible, you didn't get out of bed for three days. Okay, I get why you decided never to open that door again.

So I have to come again with a big pitch of, but we're not going there to let that overwhelm you again, we can keep that from happening, and you're going to be able to be with that part that carries the pain, you don't become the part, you'll be with it. As you're with it, what it needs is to show you where it got that pain in the past.

Yeah, it'll be tumultuous while you witness what happened to you as a child. Often as a child, not always. But after that part feels fully witnessed. I can have you go in and get that boy out of there, and take him to a safe place, at which point he'll be happy to unload the feelings and beliefs he got back there, and he'll turn into a happy, playful little kid.

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I'll bring you in as a Protector to see that you don't have to protect him anymore, and then you'll be freed up to do something else. I'm good at it, we can do all of that, and it's up to you, you don't have to. So, again, I'm just saying, and it's sincere, it is up to these Protectors, but none of them like their jobs, if there really is a chance to get out of them, then go for it.

Alex Howard

I was thinking as you were talking, that when one starts doing this sort of work because of how the fragmentation is, there's a lack of access to the gifts and the capacities of each of these places. So one starts the journey in the least resourceful place, but part of the payoff of the work is the regaining of those resources.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Yeah. Although there still are those eight C's of Self. So, yes, you don't have access to the resources of the Exiles, but you do have access to Self. And Self, like I said, can't be damaged and knows how to heal. So if I can get you to go to these places... And I know in the trauma field there's a lot of worry about once you go there, making sure you don't go over the window of tolerance, and following closely how much feeling the person can handle.

But what I find is if I can get you Alex, into courage, and clarity, and confidence, if you come in that state, you have an enormous window of tolerance. So that when we get to that boy that carries all the pain, you might start crying like crazy, but I'm not worried about it, because I know you are in Self, and you can handle it. I might say, is this okay? And you say, yeah, I can do it. Whereas if you weren't in Self, you'd say, oh, no, this is terrible.

Alex Howard

I think what's really interesting is often we don't realize our potential and our capacity, because of how energy is being consumed with these internal struggles. I was thinking that, yes IFS is a roadmap to unpick and untangle and create ease in that, but it's also a pathway to unlocking potential. There's a reclaiming of those capacities.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Yeah, not only are you cut off from the qualities of these Exiles, but your Protectors are polarized all the time. It's like a country with a lot of Exiles, as we're looking at the United States, but also Israel and so on. When there's a lot of Exiles, there's going to be a lot of very extreme Protectors, and they're going to fight with each other.

So most trauma survivors have these inner battles going on all the time that are, like you said, very energy consuming, and don't let you think clearly, and so do suppress your potential.

There are four goals of IFS. The first we've been talking about, which is to liberate these parts from the roles they've been forced into. The second is for all the parts to come to trust Self as a leader. A lot of these Protectors in particular are what in family therapy we called parentified children. They're young and they're in over their heads, but they think they've got to run everything, they think they've got to be the leaders but they're not equipped. So as they come to trust there's a you

that can do it instead, it's a big, big relief to them, and to realize you're not a little kid anymore. That helps you access a lot of potential too.

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The third goal is to, what we call, reharmonize the inner system, so that we'll bring together the parts that have been fighting with each other and help them find a new relationship. How can they work together, and how can they support you in whatever you're going to do in these new roles? People stop even noticing their parts because they don't disappear, but they're not standing out like they did because they're not embattled. They feel much more unitary, they feel much more integrated that way.

The Fourth goal is to bring more Self leadership to your external world, so that not only are you relating as a leader inside, but you're relating to your family, and to the world from those eight C's more.

Alex Howard

It's beautiful. In terms of how one meets the work, you mentioned for example when working with those places there are certain meditations. What's the general approach? It feels very implicit in lots of things that you said in terms of openness and curiosity and so on. But I'd love you to speak a bit about the inner landscape that we're cultivating, which most facilitates IFS, and indeed inner work more broadly.

Dr Richard Schwartz

I'm not quite sure what you're asking.

Alex Howard

You were talking about when we're meeting those parts, that there's an acceptance, there's a curiosity, there's an openness. I was thinking more broadly in terms of, when one is doing this work, or inner work more generally, what are some of the qualities that really help that be effective?

Dr Richard Schwartz

Most of the time, when you first meet these parts, you don't feel those qualities because you don't like them, or you're afraid of them. The beginning is just getting the ones who are polarized with them, who've been giving you that dislike, or that fear to let you handle the part.

We even say, would ask these parts to go into a kind of waiting room until we're done in there, that seems to help people have a bit of a boundary. We do that, ask these other parts to just open space until you do start to manifest the qualities you just mentioned, relative to the target part.

Once you do, then we just start the protocol, and it involves asking these questions, getting the answers, giving ultimately compassion to the part, and again, reassuring it that you're not five years old anymore, and thanking it for its service back when you were. That's a huge relief to a lot of these parts.

[00:32:56] Alex Howard

Something you said a few times, which I think is an interesting one, we haven't got loads of time left, but I think it's a good one to amplify as we come towards the end.

You were saying that healing is possible. I really like what you were saying around as a practitioner modeling the confidence around that. Sometimes in the broader therapeutic world, sometimes people go to someone in their most vulnerable moment, and that person's energy is actually lower than the client's, let's not go in. There's something around the potential that we have.

I'd love you to say a bit about the power of IFS, some of what you've observed, and the capacity that people really do have for healing, even when trauma has been significant.

Dr Richard Schwartz

I'm continually amazed and impressed at how much these parts can transform, and what happens when they do in terms of symptoms. But not only just in terms of what we've been talking about, the ability of the people to feel so much more integrated and access their full potential.

Some people say, well, isn't this like mindfulness? Well, mindfulness is a good first step, in the sense of separating and noticing what are thought of as thoughts and emotions from a place of acceptance. But it's not, from my point of view, compassionate to just notice suffering beings and stay a bit distant from them.

This means actually going to the thoughts and emotions, or the parts that are carrying them with love, and in your mind holding them, and becoming an active, good parent to them, which is what they've been waiting for, and what they've been needing.

As they trust that you can do that on a regular basis for them, and as you get them out of where they're stuck in the traumas, they start to unload all the stuff you picked up. And as they unload it, you feel much, much lighter, and they feel much lighter and more playful, and they become these happy inner children.

Then the Protectors come in and see that, and so you get this major transformation that many, many clients thought was never going to happen, would never be possible in their lifetimes. That's the reason I turned 74 this year and I still love doing it, I still can't stop because, feels like such a privilege to be with people as they do that transformation.

Alex Howard

Going back to where we started, about IFS having such enormous traction, particularly in recent years. I think one of the reasons why that is, you know more than I do, but from my outside perspective is that it brings an organized understanding to what often can feel chaotic in our experience.

I think sometimes in our suffering, we can feel very alone, and we can feel like we're broken, like there's just something that's wrong with us. And by bringing the beauty of systems, understanding and thinking, beyond the methodology for change, it's also a big reframe of what's happening Inside of us.

[00:36:43] Dr Richard Schwartz

Very much a reframe of what these parts are, what these symptoms are, and that issue of I'm broken, or I'm worthless. As people access Self, they see that's just a part that feels that way. I am all these C word qualities, that's who I really am. And that's a huge shift in somebody's self-confidence or self-conception. Just the conceptual framework, like you said, reframes all kinds of things.

Alex Howard

I'm curious as to what's emergent in your thinking at this point. IFS has had some amazing traction, and I think being adopted in a lot of different places. I'm really interested, as it comes to the end, around what you're hoping to see happen next, what's emergent in you, and in your hopes for this work?

Dr Richard Schwartz

My focus increasingly, the last five years or so, has been beyond psychotherapy to larger systems. We have a number of initiatives to bring IFS to leaders of various kinds. I work with a lot of social activists helping them do their activism from Self, rather than their righteous parts, or helping them with the fear that gets in their way.

We're running training programs for executive coaches so that leaders of organizations create Self led organizations, rather than Protector led organizations, which is the case in most.

I'm trying to bring IFS to the psychedelics world, because that's going to be a big portal to a lot of wisdom and healing. There are initiatives to bring it to education so that kids when they get hurt, know to go to the part that's hurt rather than lock it up.

There are initiatives in medicine. So, really trying to help people see it as a paradigm shift, that it's not just a psychotherapy. It's really a totally different way of understanding the mind that applies to all kinds of human activities, especially now, as we see these crises in the world. If the leaders in those crises could approach them from Self, it would make a huge difference.

We didn't get into the topic of what we call Legacy Burdens, which drive a lot of these conflicts around the world, which are these beliefs and emotions that came down through the generations related to traumas that happened, even centuries before you. There's a way to unload that.

Alex Howard

That's amazing. Dick, for people that want to find out more about IFS, can you tell us the best place to go, and also some of what they can find, in terms of different trainings and so on that you have available.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Our website is [ifs-institute.com](https://www.ifs-institute.com), most of our offerings are there. We run trainings all over the world, and the demand is enormous. It's challenging to get into a training, a lot of the time we have a lottery system, but keep trying, don't get frustrated.

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In the meantime, we have what's called the online Circle program, which gives you most of the content. In the trainings we have a three to one ratio of PA, program assistants, to students so that you get a lot of personal supervision. Which because it's very delicate in these inner systems, we really want people to know at least how to not do harm to clients as they go in. So the trainings are very intense, you do a lot of personal work, too.

There's all kinds of stuff on YouTube. The book that people love the most is this *No Bad Parts* book, which came out about three years ago. That's where I would send people initially.

Alex Howard

Wonderful Dr Richard Schwartz, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time and the wonderful body of work that you've brought to the world. Thank you.

Dr Richard Schwartz

Thank you. Alex, you're a great interviewer, and happy to talk to you.