

A Taste of Internal Family Systems (IFS) **Developed by Richard Schwartz, PhD**

IFS is a very helpful therapeutic approach to understanding our inner lives, reactions, feelings, and behaviors and for working with the inner “parts” of ourselves that drive those aspects of ourselves. It’s a valuable extension to one’s *mindfulness practice* and it can also deepen and enhance the effectiveness of many self-regulation practices. The following is an introductory overview of the IFS theory.

Principles of IFS Theory:

- We all have parts within ourselves, subpersonalities like little people that have goals and motivations; they have different levels of maturity, excitability, wisdom and pain.
- Our consciousness is composed of these parts, each with their own perspective, interests, memories, and viewpoints (beliefs/storylines).
- How we get along with these different parts of ourselves depends on our internal leadership skills - how we listen to and interact with these parts, make sure they are taken care of, and keep them from sabotaging each other.
- Every part has a positive intent for the person, even if its effects are counter-productive or cause dysfunction. There is never any reason to fight with, coerce, or try to get rid of a part. Rather we want to promote internal connection and harmony.
- Parts can have either “extreme roles” or healthy roles. Parts in extreme roles are what we work with. These parts are divided into 3 types: Managers, Exiles, and Firefighters.
- And, there’s the Self... we are by nature whole underneath this collection of parts. We all have a true or essential self, our spiritual center which is called the Self (Jung and IFS). Our Self gets eclipsed by our parts which can dominate our lives but we all have access to our Self and its healing qualities of curiosity, connectedness, compassion and calmness, courage, creativity, clarity, and confidence.
- Treatment involves disentangling ourselves from our parts and accessing the Self, which can then connect with each part and integrate it, so the parts can let go of their destructive roles and enter into a harmonious collaboration led by the Self.

The Self: The compassionate and strong core or center of the person that is designed to function as the leader of the whole person with the goal of enabling the person to thrive. I also see it as the Heart, the Witness/Observer, or Essential or Higher Self (the spiritual or deepest part of oneself). The therapeutic goal is to get the parts to trust the Self as the leader so they can be integrated and the person’s psyche is whole.

Exiles: Parts damaged by some trauma, often from childhood, who carry the “burden” of painful memories (emotions and beliefs) eg. fear, shame and guilt, especially, as well as, sadness, hurt, loneliness, grief, anger, dependency and “I’m not good enough, loveable, worthy, etc These come from one’s most extreme memories and emotions and have a lot of intensity. They are pushed into exile to protectively keep the intense pain out of conscious awareness. Exiles want to come out of exile, be seen and heard, and integrated.

The “Extreme” Protective Parts:

The Managers: Parts that direct a person’s choices in order to keep exiles from coming into conscious awareness. They generally seek to keep the person in control and to please those upon whom they depend. Examples: the “striver” who keeps the person driven to high achievement and perfectionism; the “judge” or “critic” who shames any perceived destructive behavior; the “denier” who screens out perceptions or distorts them. (They are pre-emptive, proactive protective roles (survival adaptations) to keep you in control, constantly prepared, and stop you FEELING the wound/pain of the exile.

When exiles do break through into consciousness, the firefighters rush to the scene to put out the emotional fires. They function as a defensive reaction to the exiles' emergence.

Firefighters: They douse the fires with a numbing agent such as addictive behaviors (alcohol and drugs), self-mutilation, promiscuous sexual behavior. These are felt as an overwhelming temptation. These are protective parts that react viscerally (gut). They try to soothe the wound or distract from it.

Qualities/Traits:

Self: the C’s: calmness, curiosity, compassion, connectedness, confidence, creativity, courage and clarity. (I think of the Self as our Essential Self, or true nature that emanates from our energetic Heart and the C’s as attributes of the Heart or HeartMath’s positive emotions.)

Managers: Controlling part to keep the system stable through defensive adaptation (like a mobile) via controlling, perfectionism/”goodism”, people pleasing, caretaking, planner, high achievement, and inner critic (judgmental/”shoulder”), pessimist, self-sabotage, procrastination, depression, anxiety, panic attacks.

Firefighters: Reactive protections to soothe or distract from the pain through impulsive behaviors like addictions, binge eating and eating disorders, drinking too much, promiscuity, obsessive and compulsive thinking and behaving, self-harm, angry part, or dissociation, hiding, retreating.

A **vicious cycle** often ensues: the Firefighters reaction and methods (impulsive behaviors) lead to harsh recriminations and shaming from the Managers like the judge. This then leads to the release of more exiles which leads to more firefighters coming to the rescue, and on and on...

Relating to the Parts... Through Engagement and Inquiry

Questions to pose about a part you recognize:

- What does it say or want to tell you? Want you to know? What does it need from you?
- What does it fear would happen if it stopped doing its job the way it has?
- If it was free of this job, what would it want to do for you instead? Want to feel?
- How old does it think you are? Let it know your current age.