

# Internal Family Systems (IFS)

## What is IFS?

IFS is a compassionate, experiential, evidenced based therapy model that views the client as the expert on his or her own experience and self - the therapist is there to help guide the client's journey of discovery, healing and growth. Most people find IFS to be a very non-pathologizing approach.

IFS was initially developed by Richard C. Schwartz, but has roots in such things as family systems therapy, Psychosynthesis, and Jungian psychology, among others. IFS is a trauma modality, and it can be used to help clients heal emotional wounds of all kinds and start to restore a sense of inner and outer balance.

From Jay Earley's website [www.personal-growth-programs.com](http://www.personal-growth-programs.com):

Internal Family Systems (IFS<sup>SM</sup>) is a cutting-edge form of individual therapy developed by Richard Schwartz, PhD, that provides a step-by-step approach to creating inner wholeness

- Get to know your various parts (subpersonalities)
- Target the specific psychological issues you want resolved
- Know your inner Self as the agent of transformation
- Access your hidden vulnerable parts for deep emotional healing
- Transform stuck parts of yourself into inner resources of strength, love, and freedom

The IFS model sees all people as having parts and Self, and believes having parts is desirable and natural. This is not to say everyone has Multiple Personality Disorder/Dissociative Identity Disorder (while rare, this can be true for some people - in that case their parts have become rigid and distinct, and are unaware of each other). Most of us frequently say things like, "Part of me wants to go to the event tonight, but part of me wants to stay home." This is a simple example of how we experience multiplicity!

IFS has a motto that "all parts are welcome" - the basic premise is that all parts, no matter how disruptive or misguided they can be at times, are there for a reason. They all have a benign intent for us - our job is to build a relationship with them from Self, hear their stories, earn their trust, and help them take on different versions of their roles or a new role in our psyche when they are ready - never to get rid of them.

Most of us likely already have lots of healthy parts we rely upon often, such as parenting, friendship, work, etc. parts. It is up to each person to determine when a part is getting in his or her way - while the therapist may provide guidance, ultimately which parts to work with is up to the client.

In IFS, the belief is we are born with both parts or their potential, and a Self - while a person's Self may be obscured by parts at times, the Self is always there and undamaged, no matter what a person has experienced, or how they have felt or behaved. Parts can become extreme and destructive because of life experiences, and the burdens they acquire - more on this below.

Here are some helpful definitions from Jay Earley's book "Self Therapy":

**Part:** A subpersonality, which has its own feelings, perceptions, beliefs, motivations, and memories.

**Self:** The core aspect of you that is your true Self, your spiritual center. The Self is relaxed, open, and accepting of yourself and others. It is curious, compassionate, calm, and interested in connecting with other people and your parts.

Self is not a part - some people like to think of Self as their soul/higher consciousness/Wise Mind, while parts are a person's personality. We need both - parts absolutely serve important functions, and the goal is not to be in Self all the time - we can strive to be Self-led more often, and relate to our parts more often from Self.

In IFS, we have three different types of parts. Managers and firefighters, both of which are protector parts, and exiles. (Personally I don't totally resonate with the term exiles, but will use it here for the sake of learning and example).

### **Protectors:**

**Managers:** A part that tries to protect you from pain in your current life - their motto is "Never again." E.g. - never again will it let you feel the shame you did when you were 5 and teased by your peers. Managers are *pro-active*. Oftentimes they will engage in behaviors, or bring on emotions that they believe are helping you, but are often causing pain.

**Firefighters:** A type of protector that impulsively jumps in when the pain of an exile is starting to come up in order to distract you from the pain or numb it. (from "Self Therapy" by Jay Earley).

Firefighters are *re-active* - and just like a real life firefighter will cause whatever damage they need to to a burning house in order to stop the flame, a firefighter part will cause whatever damage it needs to to a person's life to stop him or her from feeling the pain of the exile. While they believe they are being helpful, they often cause a person extreme pain.

To help illustrate, drinking alcohol could be coming from either a manager or firefighter part. If a person drinks proactively to prevent feeling the pain of his or her divorce, the drinking behavior is coming from a manager part. If a person begins drinking to stop the pain as soon as pain around the divorce starts to rise up, the drinking behavior is coming from a firefighter. (The pain may be rising up consciously or unconsciously - we are not always aware of what triggers our firefighters.)

The last type of part is an exile:

**Exile:** Young, vulnerable parts that have experienced trauma and are isolated from the rest of the system for their own or the system's protection. Exiles carry the memories, sensations, and emotions of the events and are stuck in the past - exiles carry burdens.

**Burden:** A painful emotion or negative belief about yourself or the world, which a part has taken on as the result of a past harmful situation or relationship, usually from childhood.

In the IFS process, we help exiles release their burdens so they may go back to their original state of being. Often they are our most playful, creative, and imaginative parts and can make up a lovely and important part of our inner system. Once exiles have been healed, often the protectors who protect them also take on new versions of their previous role, or a new role. This process helps bring the entire system into more balance, and we can better relate to our parts from Self in a compassionate way.

## **What does the IFS process look like?**

You can begin an IFS session with any of the following: a part you are already aware of/want to continue working with; a trailhead (a psychological issue that involves one or more parts - following it often leads to healing); an intense emotion; or anything that is overwhelming or confusing you.

On a very high level, the general process is to access and get to know both protector and exile parts from Self; build trust and relationships with these parts; as parts are ready, help them to take on less extreme versions of their role/help them find a new role in your psyche/return to their original role; allow more Self to shine through and lead the whole system. With time, clients are often able to do the IFS process on their own if they choose to.

I never know where an IFS session will go - I help clients start the process and act as a guide when needed, then trust the client's inner system to go where it needs to. I am often amazed at how powerful the IFS process can be, and have experienced its incredible healing power as both a therapist and client.

In conclusion, the following is excerpted from "Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life" by Tom Holmes:

When we are in the state of consciousness we call the Self, we are able to observe the parts but are not taken over by them. For example, there are times when we may become so angry or sad that we are not simply angry or sad, we *are* anger or sadness. In parts work (IFS) terms, the angry or sad part has blended with us and we are totally in that mind state....If we are able to step back from the feeling, then we can get some distance from the engulfing emotion. In that moment the Self can come into [the seat of] our consciousness. (p.18)

[One way] of representing Self is to see it as a conductor of an orchestra. All of the parts are the musicians playing the instruments that make the music of our lives. Without the musicians there is no music. Without the conductor the music becomes chaotic, if it begins at all. So when we go to our workplace, the conductor activates the [job] part. When it is time for our nurturing part to be present, the conductor, the Self, quiets the loud brass and may bring out the warm deep stringed instruments of our nurturing parts. So when we are functioning well and in harmony, our conductor, the Self, easily brings forth the parts of ourselves that are needed. (p. 18-19).

## **Resources**

### **Books:**

[“Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life” by Tom Holmes](#)

[Inner Active cards to help you get to know your parts](#)

[“Self Therapy” by Jay Earley](#)

### **Websites:**

<https://ifs-institute.com/>

<https://personal-growth-programs.com/>

### **Podcasts:**

[The One Inside](#)

[Jonathan Van Ness interviews the creator of IFS - great intro to the model!](#)

[Intro to IFS with Derek Scott on The One Inside](#)

### **Videos:**

[Derek Scott's YouTube channel with lots of great videos about IFS](#)

[Derek Scott's Parenting and IFS series for Non-Therapists](#)