

# About Internal Family Systems Therapy

## The IFS Model

Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy is *not* family therapy. The name refers to each person's internal community, or "family" of parts. Very often, our internal systems become organized around emotional pain, and how to manage it. An IFS therapist works with you to release pain, calm down problem areas and problem behaviors, and restore your original joy in life.

A basic concept in IFS is the idea of the "parts" of each of us. Normally, I think of myself as being one person – I may contradict myself sometimes, and I may even be at war with myself inside, but I see myself as being one monolithic Me. IFS explores this Me as a system of parts. What are the parts that I am composed of, what are their roles, what are their agendas, and how well do they get along? We are of course a single entity, but on a different scale we can be seen as a multiplicity.

For instance, let's say you have a problem with procrastination. If you are looking at that issue from a parts perspective, you would probably encounter a part of yourself that gets infuriated by the procrastination. That kind of part can't find a better way to improve the situation beyond bullying you into doing better, or developing new self-improvement plans. And it gets very frustrated when – as so often happens – your self-improvement plan falls through.

The procrastinating part might not be so vocal. In fact, it might just silently show up and make you pull the covers over your head, or sit and gloomily watch television, or take some other tack, just when the other part is saying *you must get your act together*. IFS looks at the polarity between parts like these when they really don't get along. IFS works with these parts separately to find out why they do what they do, and if they would switch to less extreme roles if they had the chance. You treat them as members of your internal family.

## Protectors and Protected

In this model of a human being there are basically two kinds of parts – the Protectors and the Protected. The protectors are further divided into two types; these are called Managers and Firefighters. The part I mentioned above that makes plans and tries to whip you into shape is a typical Manager. Managers are great at anticipating and controlling situations before the trouble begins. Managers often function as inner (or outer) critics, sometimes pushing you to strike and assert yourself before anyone else has lashed out. Other Managers may urge you to hide and duck for cover, even when the signs of danger are minimal. Managers manage. They are preemptive and they tend to think through the situation.

But let's say your Managers work on a situation and they fail to give you good protection. Or let's say that based on their track record, you don't have confidence that they will keep you safe. Then the second kind of protectors, Firefighters, come into play. Firefighters are reactive, and like real firefighters, they stay very focused on responding to the emergency at hand. So you'll see real firefighters smash windows, break down doors and walls, and douse whole buildings in water just to make sure that the fire does not spread. Our internal Firefighters are just as focused on the main job, but sometimes there's a lot of collateral damage.

In the example in the previous section, the procrastinator is a Firefighter. For some reason (which we'll take a look at shortly), the procrastinator has determined that there is something dangerous in fairly simple acts like cleaning your house, paying the bills, or getting a job done on time. This doesn't seem to make sense, so what IFS does is invite you to have conversations with the procrastinator to find out why it's behaving this way.

In our culture, Firefighters often show up as addictions, phobias and compulsions. So drug use, drinking, sexual compulsions, food disorders, compulsive gambling, excessive sleeping, that Procrastinator, and other parts that use tactics to distract us and numb us, are Firefighters. These parts really annoy the Managers usually, and these parts get a pretty bad rap in our culture. And yet they are here with us in massive amounts, and they don't look like they are going anywhere soon. What is their purpose? To find that out you need to look at the parts that need all this protection.

## **The Exiles**

The protected parts in this IFS model are called Exiles. Exile energy is all the emotions that the protectors are protecting us from – fear, out of control rage, despair, worthlessness, terror – all the feelings we would much rather not be feeling. But we can't actually not feel what's inside us, so our internal systems do the next best thing and cut off access to these parts' extreme emotions. And these tactics are what we have just been looking at – the methods used by the Managers and the Firefighters. They ball the pain into an emotional cyst, where, as much as possible, the bad feelings get sealed off from damaging the rest of the system and at the same time stay protected from restimulation by the world outside.

So, the activity of Firefighters, though it looks a little crazy, may now make more sense. The Procrastinator sees the act of approaching various tasks as having the very real potential of activating an Exile and releasing its terrible feelings into the system at large. Knowing that it's going to feel the ire and recrimination of the self-critical Manager and maybe a few other parts as well, the Procrastinator goes ahead and makes you sleep, or veg out in front of the TV anyway. This part is totally focused on keeping the Exile sealed away, and it is willing to accept all kinds of collateral damage in this cause, including getting fired by your boss or getting your lights cut off.

Many people who compulsively indulge in a Firefighter activity, like drinking or drugs, find that when they give up their bad habit, instead of feeling better and lighter, they quite

soon feel worse. From the IFS perspective, this makes sense. If you give up the protective role that a Firefighter offers without releasing any of the pain of the Exiles or renegotiating with the protectors in the system, you would expect to feel more raw, more in pain, and actually be more at risk from being overwhelmed by painful and terrifying emotions. This, more than innate weakness or badness, is what makes so many people “relapse” back into their compulsive activity. Until they have done the right inner work, it will be very hard for them to make their new and better life stay in place.

So where do Exiles come from? Exiles are usually parts of ourselves that had to be walled off at an early age. Children are not only helpless in the face of the rage, the neglect, or the attacks of adults, they haven’t yet evolved ways to modulate and control their own inner experience of emotion. Everything just comes streaming in.

So when bad things happen, as they inevitably do, children don’t have the option of taking it philosophically. They either have to release their bad feelings in some way, or else ball them up and hide them inside in places they can’t reach any more. Each time a child does that, a little piece of them gets frozen – and that little piece doesn’t just hold their pain, it also holds the spontaneity, the joy and the aliveness of being a child. Piece by piece, the Exiles get formed until we reach adulthood as slightly uptight, disconnected people who have to think before they dare to feel. We put value on our entertainments and possessions rather than on our spontaneous feelings, our exuberance, and the pleasure of simple sense impressions, because it is safer that way, and maybe access to these simple pleasures is pretty much denied anyway.

As the poet William Blake says:

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.*

This cutting off does not just happen to people who have been through some terrible trauma or years of abuse. It is rampant in our culture, and comes from all the major or minor bad experiences happened to us where there was no kind and wise presence to help us through our painful feelings. But when we cut ourselves off from pain we were forced also to cut ourselves off from the splendor of life. And so, by necessity, we gradually get identified with the little calculations of the Managers and the silly compulsions of the Firefighters. The work of IFS is to release the burden of pain from the Exiles, so that the Managers and Firefighters can assume the roles that they might have been doing all along. We don’t fight these parts and we certainly don’t want to destroy them. We want to release them from their extreme roles, and once that has been done we can release them from the burdens they carry also.

In an introduction like this, I won’t say a great deal about releasing burdens, but basically, the young part that has been exiled tells its story and shows its feelings to you when you are in a state of authentic and open-hearted compassion. It is the contact of the Exile with your core Self that creates the healing. After the Exile has told its story, this

young part can finally release the pain out of your internal system altogether, and reconnect with its natural spontaneity and vibrancy. That, very briefly, is how the healing takes place.

## **The Self**

Sometimes we get so focused on fixing parts, that we forget they are what engage us with the world, and get us through life. They are a natural and proper part of anybody's internal system – the only problem comes when they get pushed into extreme roles. For parts to work harmoniously, they have to be informed by the presence of our core identity, or Self.

A central idea of IFS is that beyond all the trouble and struggle of parts, we have a core identity that is undamaged and whole. It is the piece of consciousness I was before my parents signed a piece of paper that gave me a name – it's my deepest identity. Most people experience Self very differently from parts. Experiences of Self usually come with a sense of everything being right inside, a sense of spaciousness, a feeling of open-heartedness, and impressions of peace and calm, or even exultation. Self experiences tend to take place in natural or beautiful settings, in relation to other people when there is a sense of community and connection, and in meditation or other religious practice. Self is not attached to any agenda and does not get frightened or flattered, but just is.

Perhaps because of this “just is” aspect, or maybe because of a supposedly scientific bias in our culture, ideas like the concept of Self do not always appear in psychotherapy models. It's really rather a shame that this concept of a core “me” that is instinctively wise and healing should be unusual or revolutionary. Be that as it may, the task of IFS is to bring this core Self that “just is” into connection with the parts of me that are so fixed on doing. This is done by some disarmingly simple techniques where I ask my parts to “step back,” and where the therapist asks me how I feel towards a part. In doing these things I locate more of my identity outside of parts and in Self. If all my parts step back, the “I” who remains is Self.

## **What Does The Therapy Look Like?**

I want to give you a closer look then, of what an IFS session looks like. In some places it is like any other kind of “talk” psychotherapy, but there are places where the work is very internal and very different, in this effort to connect parts with Self. The example I'm giving here is from a first session, and gives you the flavor of how things begin. It's not meant to show the deeper work or to give an extraordinary outcome. It just shows the method.

I met Bill in a needle exchange where I work sometimes. As a heroin user, he has a well-defined Firefighter. His first approach to me was in the drop-in area of the exchange, where he asked as I walked by, “Hey, do you know a good place for a man to go and die?”

Well, yes, that caught my attention, and I invited him into the back for a session. There he went on to say, “I never cried a single day in my life, but I’m crying now. If I had the courage to, I’d kill myself now. I’m doing heroin again and I’m not even enjoying it. And now I’m doing pills too. I always looked down on people who do pills, and now I’m one of them. I’m at the end of my rope. It’s been like this all my life and it’s only getting worse. Got any good ideas?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I think I do, if you’re willing to work with me in a new kind of way.”

Bill said he was game for that, so I explained that IFS was a kind of therapy where you go inside yourself and get in touch with the different parts that seem to be creating your problem. I invited Bill to take a couple of deep breaths, slow himself down a little, and see if he could feel the part of himself that wants to do drugs. I told him that a part of yourself can sometimes be felt as a body sensation, or seen as a visual image, or you just know that you are in touch with it.

Bill, who moments before had been quite excited, was now very quiet and inward-focused. “Yes, he said, I can feel that part right now. I can feel it here in my chest, and down here in my solar plexis.”

“That’s great. And how do you feel towards that drug-using part?”

“How do I feel towards it?” asked Bill, a puzzled and surprised.

“Yes, Bill.” And I took a piece of paper and drew a large circle. “Here’s you,” I said. Inside the large circle I drew a much smaller one, “and here is your drug using part. It’s not all of you, is it? It’s just one part of you. So, how do you feel towards it?”

Bill thought hard for a while. “I hate it,” he said at last, “and it scares the shit out of me.”

I explained to Bill that our goal right then was to find out more about why the heroin part did what it did. To get to that understanding, the fear and the hatred would have to stand back a little and find a way to quiet down. It was just the same as if you were in a crowded room and everyone nearby was talking very loudly. You would have to ask them to lower the volume if you wanted to hear what just one person was saying. I also explained that this did not mean we were joining sides with the heroin part, we were trying to get to know it better so that it could start to change.

Bill focused inside and reached the drug-using part of himself. His face became softer, and he looked more reflective.

“It says it is the only one who really takes care of me and keeps the monster at bay.”

“Do you know what it means by that? Can you tell me?”

“When I can’t think my way out of a bad mood, or that I Can Get Through This part of me doesn’t work, then this one is always there to help me survive. It gets me through the bad feelings.”

“Did you know all this before, Bill?” I said.

“Not this way. No, not really at all.”

“Would it be hard or easy for this part of you to give up its job before it knows you can take care of yourself some other way?”

“Oh, very hard.”

“So ask this part, if you could ever take care of those bad feelings in a different way, would it need to keep doing what it’s doing,” I said.

“Of course not,” Bill replied on behalf of the part, “but you’ll never be able to do that.”

At this point, this acknowledgement was all I needed from Bill’s part, because the seed of hope had been planted. “That’s okay,” I said, “for now we are just glad to hear that it might be willing to change if it thought it was safe enough. Can you ask that part if it would be willing to let us take a try in our work together?”

Bill went back inside himself and contacted the part. “Sure it would. What’s to lose?”

Bill, who had started the session clearly suicidal, finished it with the grudging complement, “You’ve given me a lot to think about!”

The end of Bill’s story has yet to be written, but I’m glad to say that soon after our session he went into a detox. What is useful to us about this session is that it shows some of the most typical techniques of IFS. I helped Bill locate his parts, helped some parts step back while Bill focused on others, and started to develop Bill’s connection to Self energy by asking how he felt towards the part. We also found that Bill’s core problems were his feelings of worthlessness, or whatever constituted his particular “monster.” The next stage of the work is to approach that “monster” and find that it is nothing more than the hurt feelings of exiled parts that have been bottled up for a long, long time. After that comes the unburdening of that pain.

What grabs the limelight for us may be that Bill’s Firefighter was a heroin-using part. But an IFS therapist would get more interested in the role of that Firefighter than the fact that its coping mechanism is a drug. The Firefighter might have used anything to help cope – sex, an issue around over- or under-eating, any so-called addiction, or a dissociative part that makes me space out at crucial times, a procrastinating part, or a part that just makes me crawl into bed and not come out all day long. IFS focuses less on the behavior and more on the function of the part, which, when it is extreme like this, always seems to be about finding a way to not experience the pain stored inside us.

We can get so identified with parts and their internal warfares that we don't always have much connection to Self. It's like Self is a great idea, but not an experience. IFS therapy helps your Self, your core, connect with your parts, and release emotional healing. And the more you can come from a place of Self leadership, the more healed, and the more engaged in life you will be. The role of the therapist in this is to be the guide, or the coach, and a container of Self energy too. But the healing is done by you inside of you.

## **Exercises**

If you are interested, here are two IFS exercises you may be interested in trying out. They are both tools to develop more Self energy.

### **I. Hang Out With Whoever's There**

You can do this any time you're not actively engaged in a task or talking to people. You could be sitting down just to do this, but it's also interesting to try it while you're walking somewhere, on a train, or something like that.

Take a couple of deeper breaths and then focus inside yourself and see who's there. It might not be a part you especially wanted to get to know better – it might be your grumpiness, or loneliness, a physical discomfort, anything. Whatever it is you get closer to inside, just stay with it. Watch how other parts may come in to criticize, improve, or if it is a good feeling, desperately preserve. Watch them too. Just stay in this more sustained contact for as long as works. Then thank your parts for giving you their company. Do this as often as you like.

### **II. Feel Your Heart**

This is an exercise that you do sitting down in meditation. Relax, take a few deep breaths, and then physically and emotionally, feel your heart. Does it feel open, or do you get a sense that it is closed and encrusted? Can you feel the Protectors around it, or the Exiles that are inside it? If you get a sense of the Protectors, ask them to step back for a little while so you can get closer to the Exiles.

The Exiles are not “bad feelings.” The Exiles are young, delightful, spontaneous parts of yourself that are burdened by bad feelings they didn't ask for. Do nothing more than get to know these young parts, and appreciate them. Or, if you don't reach an Exile, get to know the Protectors who are doing such yeoman duty in keeping you safe. Appreciate them too. *[from Dick Schwartz]*

None of the ideas in this essay are mine. They all come from Richard Schwartz, who created Internal Family Systems Therapy. Dick was once a conventional family systems therapist, but after he became dissatisfied with that model, he took its systems approach and applied it to individuals. From that, and from careful learning from his clients, Dick developed IFS. I want to thank him for creating a wonderful contribution not just to

therapy, but also to all of our emotional healing. I hope the world soon understands how big this is.

The IFS web site is [www.selfleadership.com](http://www.selfleadership.com).

A lot of the material there is for therapists more than it is for clients, but there are one or two articles that go into more detail about IFS, and there is a page where you can buy a client's guide called *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, also known as the spiral-bound book, and audio and video tapes by Dick.