

# Internal Family Systems (IFS)

*This is an excerpt from my Masters' thesis. To read full thesis, go to my website, [AuthenticAlchemyX3.com](http://AuthenticAlchemyX3.com), and link to the Publications-Professional tab*

IFS is a body-centered, psychotherapeutic model that is strongly based on the development of relationship between individual parts (aspects) of a person and how those parts relate to the Self. IFS operates under the belief that each individual has a multitude of subpersonalities, otherwise known as parts. Parts of the individual are perceived of as, paradoxically, both separate from the Self and as critical elements of the Self. Incorporated within IFS are elements of a variety of psychotherapists and theoretical orientations including: Family Systems Theory, Humanism, Buddhism, Developmental Psychology, Trauma Theory, Gestalt therapy, and Jung's active imagination.

## Self

Within the IFS framework, eight of the main qualities of the Self are “curiosity, compassion, calmness, confidence, courage, clarity, creativity, and connectedness.” Within the IFS model, ego-based orientations to self (e.g., self-concept) are viewed as parts, whereas Self is transpersonal in nature; no matter how regressed a person may be, the Self is ever present. IFS is an empowering model in that it assumes that everyone has a Self - a grounded and resourced aspect that they can tap into at any time.

## Parts

IFS therapy works towards integrating all aspects (parts) of the human being. Parts are sub-personalities or aspects of the personality that interact internally in sequences and styles that are similar to the ways that people interact. In the IFS model there are three broad categories of parts: managers, exiles, and firefighters.

Exiled parts are often what Jung would call shadows and what Nathaniel Brandon would call the disowned self. They are usually young aspects that were not (or are not) allowed full expression. Some examples of this are: a) a young man who grows up in a machista culture is demeaned when he shows sensitivity and emotions - the sensitive and emotional aspect of him must be exiled; and b) a child who was angry at her abusive father could not risk experiencing her own anger as this could threaten her survival. A part that holds unprocessed trauma is usually exiled. Young parts can be exiled via a singular experience or series of experiences, spoken or unspoken cultural mores, individual or collective trauma, and ancestral burdens (i.e., beliefs passed down from generation to generation).

Parts may also be exiled in adulthood. An example is a woman whose husband is no longer interested in sex shuts off her sexual feelings in order to keep the relationship stable; her sexuality goes underground and becomes exiled. Another example is a war veteran who had to learn that being in a relaxed state could get a person killed; as a result, relaxed and playful states may become exiled. Exiled parts are often a byproduct of traumatic experience.

**Protector Parts:** Managers & Firefighters. There are other parts within the system that may either deny the exiles existence and/or create an internal war with those exiles in order to keep them under control. The parts are called protector parts, as they protect the exiles, usually via control, force, addiction or dissociation. IFS terms for these protectors are managers and firefighters.

**Manager parts.** The primary role of managers is to internally prevent exiles from leaking out and taking over. Managers also try to control the external world (i.e., the individual's environment and relationships). Managers do this to protect against judgment, humiliation, abandonment, and rejection from the outside world. Managers are the parts responsible for making sure the person looks good to the world. It is through the managers that a false (ego-based) self-identity is formed; they are the parts that create the stories and the narratives that people live by.

**Firefighter parts** are protectors that spring into action when managers are unable to keep the exiles exiled; firefighters put out the emotional fire with various soothing and escapist strategies. They may be highly reactionary and impulsive, which means they can easily wreck havoc in a person's life. For example, when a woman is lonely and her normal managing strategies are not working or are not available (e.g., talking to friends, going to movies), firefighter parts may jump in to keep the loneliness at bay. Such firefighters may lead the woman to binge eat, compulsively shop, gamble, or get drunk. Firefighters can be the source of addictions; addictions can run the gamut from drugs, alcohol, gambling, shopping, and television. Firefighters may also be the source of physical pain, illness, and dissociation. In their most extreme state, firefighters can be suicidal. Managers are polarized with firefighters because of the recklessness and mess they often cause in individuals' lives. In turn, firefighters are polarized with managers as managers can be very rigid, tight, and judgmental. These protectors have often assumed their roles in early childhood and are burdened just as exiles are burdened.

## Nonpathological model

Parts are viewed as sane strategies to get unmet needs met within an unhealthy environment; they are not viewed as pathological aspects of the individual that must be eradicated. Every part is viewed as doing the best it knows how in order to help the internal system of the individual; however, these parts have limited resources for several possible reasons. They are: (a) stuck at an age/time in which they took on their roles, (b) hold a particular belief system, (c) do not have access to the bigger picture, and/or (d) do not know or trust that the Self can effectively lead the system. The intention of IFS therapy, ultimately, is to unburden these protector parts from their extreme roles and to welcome the unburdened exile back into the internal system. The unburdening allows parts to transform so that they can work more collaboratively within the internal system, thereby allowing the Self to lead the internal system.

## The goals in IFS therapy are fourfold:

1. To unburden parts from their extreme roles.
2. To assist parts in discovering their appropriate roles and to provide input to Self.
3. To differentiate and elevate the Self so that it can be an effective leader in the system.
4. To create a harmonious and balanced internal system.

## Self-led therapist

Critical to the IFS methodology is the Self-led therapist. The Self-led therapist will be able to make contact with and attune with the client's Self more easily than would a parts-led therapist. A Self-led therapist makes it possible for the client's protectors (managers and firefighters) to allow the client's Self to emerge. This requires that IFS therapists have great familiarity with their own parts and how their clients' parts may activate their own parts. Moreover, IFS therapists must be able to move their parts to a supportive position within their own internal family system when they have been triggered by a client's parts so that the therapist's Self is available to lead the therapeutic process. IFS therapists' efficacy is dependant upon their willingness to work on their own parts in their own IFS therapy and/or supervision.

Furthermore, when it is appropriate to disclose, IFS therapists must be transparent when their own parts are triggered; they must admit they were operating from a part and apologize to the client. This allows for authentic relationship, role modeling, and repair of the relationship due to interference from the therapist's parts.