

Self-therapy with the IFS method

I can still remember one encounter that changed so much in my life. That was an encounter with a forgotten part of my personality, which I had locked in the basement.

After conversing with one of these subpersonalities, which would go to any lengths to secure the access to what is most vulnerable and wounded in me, I felt as if some kind of internal door opened inside of me. I saw scared boy, cringed out of fear, whose hands were tied with a thick rope.

I knew right away that this part of me is what the IFS model refers to as exiles. They are the parts that carry various childhood emotional burden and wounds from the past. Sometimes they can manifest themselves as grief, or fear, or shame, or a sense of worthlessness. At other times, they can be experiences as a dull pain of loneliness or longing.

One of the main goals of the IFS therapy is to set these parts free of the childhood memories in which they were “frozen” together with all the emotions that can still have a destructive impact on our lives. But before we get about that, it is crucial to meet those protective parts, whose role is to shield us from difficult emotions, namely the Critic, the Perfectionist, the Fear, the Anger and many others that work on our subconscious level and thus rule our lives.

It was amazing for me to experience this little boy being released and healed. I felt as if someone took a load off my back. Even though my encounter with this part lasted for only half an hour, something did really change in me. Deep down, I knew that this not a fleeting state of relief but a lasting change that was about to happen.

In situations where I used to feel intimidated or withdrawn, I started to feel... good. I could finally be myself, relaxed being exactly who I really am. The fear of building deep and authentic relationships disappeared and it turned out to be one of the most important internal changes in my life.

My name is Michael Pasterski and for 3 years now I have been fascinated with the approach, still new in our culture, according to which our personality is not homogeneous but made of various parts. I am the founder of Life Architect and the Foundation for Conscious Education. I have been conducting psychological workshops and giving individual coaching sessions for 9 years. He is the author of "Insight. Road to Mental Maturity" and writes about psychology, education and personal development on his blog at MichalPasterski.pl, which attracts the attention of more than one million readers a year.

For the last 2 years, I have been ardently exploring one of the most innovative and effective methods based on the multiplicity of mind. It is called IFS, e.g. Internal Family Systems. In this ebook, you will be presented and acquainted with the essentials of this therapy model as well as guidelines which will help you set off on your own individual journey into your inner realm.

The present e-book consists of two parts. In the first part you will learn about how the paradigm of the multiplicity of the mind developed with time and what the main postulates of the IFS therapy are. You will also learn what distinguishes the IFS model from approaches in psychotherapy. That part of the e-book was published in the early 2018 as an entry on my blog entitled "IFS, e.g. your internal family". If you read it then, I suggest giving it another read in order to refresh what it said about the history of IFS. If you want to skip that part, start reading from page 31.

The second part contains my guidelines, published for the first time, on how to do self-therapy with IFS. You will find out how to explore your subpersonalities and learn ways to get in touch and build relationships with them.

I wish you an enjoyable and fruitful reading!

Internal Family Systems - Meet your inner family

What would you say to a conversation with your Inner Critic, The Perfectionist or Inner Child? IFS therapy (Internal Family Systems Therapy) is a somewhat new, 30-year old psychotherapy method based on dialogues with parts of our personality. IFS claims that in each one of us exists a unique inner family, so called “subpersonalities”.

If you ever felt torn inside (for example one part of you wants to change your job and the other wants to stay in the current one),

or

if you hear different voices in your imagination (for example the unpleasant voice of your Inner Critic, who tries to cut your legs from underneath you).

or

if in the company of colleagues and friends you behave differently than in the company of your parents and totally different than in the company of your life partner...

...then thinking in the categories of “parts of personality” will become natural to you quite easily. The basis of IFS theory and model is the assumption that our personality consists of many “subpersonalities”, in other words - parts.

And we’re not talking here about the kind of division of our mind like Hollywood so readily scares us in movies about split personality or schizophrenia. We’re talking about a perfectly normal and healthy state of our mind, which - contrary to what most of the society believes - is not a solid, indivisible thing.

A perfect demonstration of this comes through the animated movie “Inside out”, which was created in collaboration with the known emotion expert, Paul Ekman.

This animated movie makes me feel a great deal of positive emotions... in a warm, funny and very accessible way it illustrates the complexity of our mind. You can find it by clicking it [here](#).

Understanding the multiple nature of our mind (“multiplicity of the mind”) on many levels changes how we perceive and treat ourselves and opens a whole spectrum of new

possibilities in the context of psychotherapy and self-growth. I wrote about subpersonalities in my book "Insight. The road to mental maturity" in the chapter 9, Inner agreement. However, when I was writing this chapter, I didn't yet know IFS therapy, which helped me to look at the idea of a divided mind on a much deeper level.

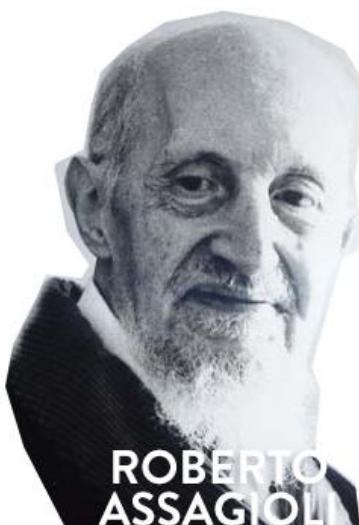
Before I write more about our main hero of today's article, the IFS method, I would like to show you how psychologists and psychotherapists during the last century came to the conclusion that our personality is built from many different parts - smaller personalities.

A change of paradigm

Everything started a long, long time ago... from two really smart guys - Socrates and Plato. They both claimed that mind is, at least, dual.

Sadly, for many centuries this idea wasn't continued. First modern models of multiple personality came around 1890 and 1910. Sadly, most of them claimed that it is not a natural state of mind, but rather an effect of trauma, which fragmented our personality. However, even then some theories thought the fragmentation could be something perfectly natural.

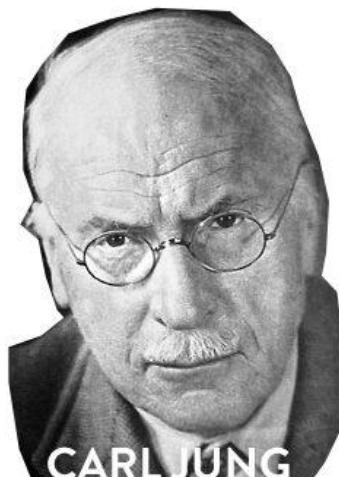
Let's have a little trip through time:



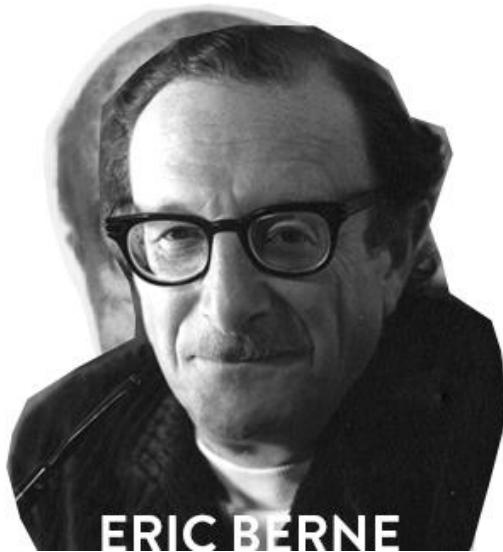
The first theorist, which claimed that multiplicity is a natural state of mind and subpersonalities are valuable and not pathological, was Assagioli - Italian psychiatrist, the founder of psychosynthesis and Freud's student, who stopped working with him 3 years earlier than Carl Jung.



In the 1960's Fritz Perls developed Gestalt therapy, which also took into account the multiplicity of personality. Perls talked about a common inner conflict between two parts: "topdog" (strict, critical part, behaving like a parent) and "underdog" (the childlike part, guilty and ashamed).



Carl Jung, one of the most famous psychotherapists of our times, was convinced that our personality is formed from many different parts. Jung, during his early career years, noticed the multiple nature of our mind. He wrote: "The so-called unity of consciousness is an illusion... we like to think that we are one but we are not". Jung conversed with his parts and discovered that in his psyche there are things he does not create himself, but which live a life of their own.



- In the 1960's Eric Berne developed the Transactional Analysis, which took into account 3 groups of ego states: Parent, Child, Adult. Berne thought that our emotional states depend on the dialogues between certain parts.
- Modern times are abundant in approaches accepting the multiplicity of mind. The most famous are Voice Dialogue (Hal and Sondra Stone), schema therapy (Jeffrey Young; a subbranch of cognitive-behavioural therapy) or Focusing.

According to John Rowan, the author of the book "Discover Your Subpersonalities" there are over twenty synonyms for the word "subpersonality", such as ego states, voices, energetic patterns, I subsystems, second personalities, deeper potentials and so on.

Subpersonalities in neuropsychology

Interestingly, this way of thinking about the human mind is currently confirmed by many known and respectable neuropsychologists. Technology, which allows us to precisely study the human brain, shows us that this most important organ work as a collaboration of different, autonomous "modules".

Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine writes that subpersonalities are "states of mind, which have a common pattern of activity in time. Those specialised "I" have a particular way of independent processing of information and achieving goals.

Every person has many such codependent and at the same time individual processes, which exist in time, with a feeling of continuity which creates the experience of the

mind.” (Siegel, 1999, pp 231). In turn, a neuroscientist, David Eagleman (Stanford University) compares the multiplicity of mind to a jury, who have to make a verdict, or to a democracy, which has to choose a single president.

I particularly like the approach of an American intellectual and writer Douglas Hofstadter, who received a Pulitzer award in 1979, for a book about cognitive processes and intelligence. He speaks about subpersonalities from the perspective of neurology: “The mind, with its billions of neurons, is like a community made from smaller communities. The communities at the highest level (right under the level of wholeness) are something I like to call subpersonalities or inner voices... They are the competing aspects of ourselves, which try to govern the whole”.

Although both science and experience show that our mind is not a unity, for many people, sadly, the thought that we are a collective of many parts is something completely foreign. The idea that we are “lords of our mind” is comfortable - we like to think that we have our inner world under control. It’s much easier to control a whole mind, rather than a bunch of entities of an inner society.

Moreover, acknowledging the fact that we have different parts can mean that we will have to listen to them or to discover their emotions. That may not be pleasurable or comfortable. Our defense mechanisms can be very strong, making us afraid and discourage us to look within and to discover various parts of ourselves.

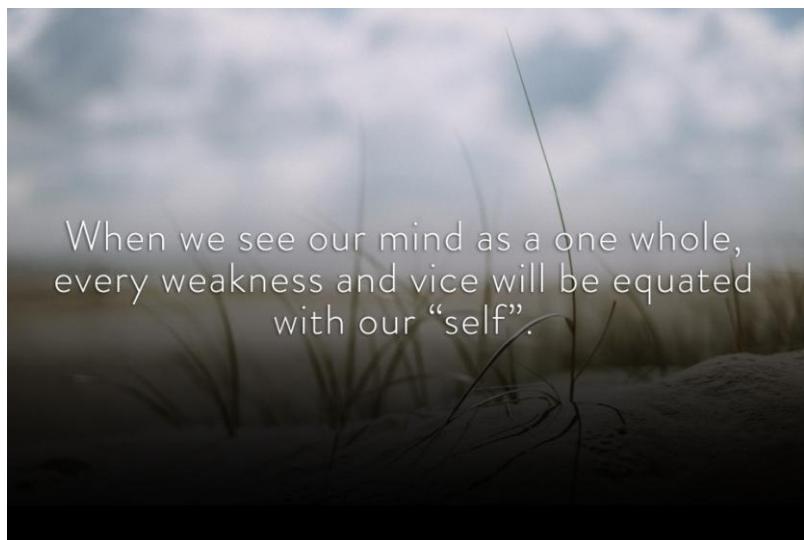
In truth, the change of thinking from “monomind” to “multiple mind” can have greater consequences in our lives than we might think. Why?

The fall of the “monomind” myth

Let’s take for an example our Inner Lazy-bones. This state in which we don’t feel like doing anything. If we experience it from time to time, there’s a big chance we sometimes call ourselves “lazy”, equating ourselves with this judgement. This judgement becomes a part of our personality and lowers our self-esteem.

But even those of us, who have a very active Inner Lazy-bones can experience, from time to time, the active and ambitious part of their personality. Judging ourselves based on one subpersonality is to ignore the whole richness of the inner world which creates us.

But what if you have more than just one of those destructive parts? What if, during a certain stage of your life, the dominating parts of your personality are Inner Critic, Lazy-bones, Guilt and Regret? Treating those states as an indivisible part of yourself, as an integral part of your character, can be a blockade on a very deep level.



In case of the abovementioned lazy part of the personality, it's much more adequate to say "A part of me is lazy", rather than judging yourself as a Lazy-bones. The awareness that you are not "damaged", but only that some part of you (for some exact reason) forces you to act this way, can be very liberating. It gives you a sense of control and empowers your self-esteem.

Moreover, if we can't see the whole richness of energies, motives, desires and experiences that exist in our psyche, our understanding of ourselves becomes very limited. From this perspective, we treat most of our behaviours as useless habits, as damaging leftovers from the past or as effects of mistakes in thinking.



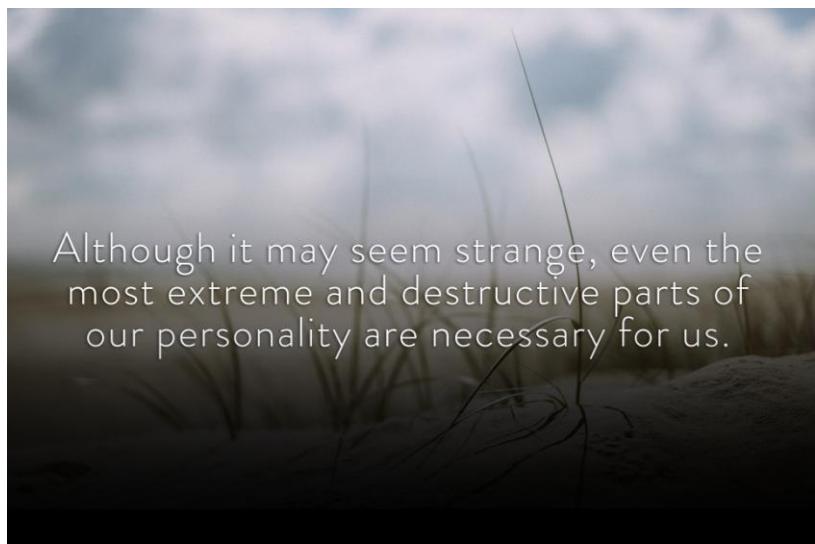
Becoming aware of the module-type construction of our personality frees us from the destructive judgement of our own "Self" and helps to understand even the most problematic parts of ourselves. It is the basis for self-acceptance. In turn, solving inner

conflicts and building peace and agreement between parts of self brings the end of the habit of self criticizing and autodestruction. It's the basis of self-support.

Every conversation with parts of your personality will be a good opportunity to heal one aspect of your psyche.

When we look at ourselves from the perspective of a multiplicate mind and we interact with parts of our personality, we see the whole, amazing, inner world. Understanding how our parts work leads us to deep compassion, self-compassion and acceptance of even the darkest nooks of our personality.

All parts are welcome



All those restrictive beliefs, destructive habits and harsh emotions are defense mechanism that make perfect sense. They are tools used by our parts to protect the most vulnerable in us. They do what they do, because they don't know that they can do it differently. Some of them took on their roles when we were still children, others learned their roles from parents and caretakers.

Without understanding what IFS so accurately teaches us - that every part of our personality is in its essence good and has a positive intention - it's so easy to judge, negate and struggle with those aspects of us that make our lives harder. And when we fight and struggle, and negate our inner voices - they become even more extreme, and the problem deepens.

In many therapeutic modalities our inner hardships are treated as if they are bad, as if they are something that needs to change - but the best way to free ourselves from emotional blockades is to look at them with openness, compassion and understanding.

And this is IFS' motto: "All parts are welcome". When we look within ourselves, putting those words into practice, we open the way to inner transformation. Deep and meaningful change happens when a certain subpersonality realizes that it doesn't need to fill its role and can support us in a different way.



Sadly, most of psychotherapeutic modalities still partake in the monomind paradigm and the solutions they propose enhance this mindset. Someone who has some sort of mental disorder will therefore think he is completely "disordered". Not only he has no control over some part of himself, he also thinks he has a faulty mind. In many situations this way of thinking can greatly hinder the ability to regain health.

There are also psychotherapeutic modalities that make this important step in the right direction. For example the mindfulness movement or ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy). The essence of those approaches is the separation of thoughts and emotions and observing them with kindness and acceptance. Even though they suggest to look inside ourselves with greater empathy, both methods don't suggest to come into interaction with our emotions or ways of thinking. This interaction is present in the IFS model and it opens many ways to deepen the understanding of your own self and healing of inner wounds.

Now, let's take a closer look at how the Internal Family Systems model understands human psyche and how it differs from other psychotherapeutic modalities.

Internal Family System

Before IFS saw daylight, its future creator, Richard Schwartz was a family therapist. Working with his clients he began to pay closer attention to the language they used. While describing their inner world the clients often used the word “part”, saying for example: “a part of me wants to get a divorce, and a part of me wants to continue this relationship”



Schwartz decided to listen to his intuition. Following his clients, listening to what they say about parts of their personality, he discovered something, that forever changed his career and led him to create the IFS model.

Paying close attention both to his own parts and to “internal families” of his clients, Schwartz learned that subpersonalities are not merely mechanical functioning of our psyche, or a fleeting state of mind, which passes within a few moments. Subpersonalities are like little people who live within us. They form around certain needs (safety, belonging, self-actualization and so on) and they have their own desires, fears or habits. They are linked to particular emotions and have certain beliefs.

For example, Perfectionist is something much more than just a need to do everything perfectly. This part of our personality can be linked to:

- A belief that if we make a mistake, others will criticize us,
- A feeling of inner compulsion and pressure focused on making every single project absolutely perfect,
- Tensions in the body, which happen every time we work on something,
- A habitual obsessive checking of every detail of our work
- A need to avoid a feeling of rejection, which can happen if we make a mistake,

So the Perfectionist is like a complete personality, which, together with other parts, comes together as something we call “I”, our personality.

Depending on the situation, different parts become active. Have you ever noticed you behave differently in various situations? We behave in one way when we are with friends on holidays, and another one when we meet our parents. In one moment we can be full of hope, thinking about the future, and in another we can feel our life lost its meaning.

Every one of us has plenty of different, often clashing, feelings, which live in us at the same time. Some are active and dominant, others may be muffled or locked in the cellar of our subconsciousness.



If we aren't paying attention to how our body reacts and what thoughts (voices) arise in our head in a particular moment, we won't notice that during a single day few or even multiple parts can be active (John Rowan, british psychotherapist, in his book “Discover Your Subpersonalities” writes that we usually have 4 to 9 main subpersonalities).

Richard Schwartz learned all this already in the 1980's, however his first book about the model he created was published in 1995. He writes about the IFS as a model of psychotherapy, a model of mind and a life practice.

I think it's not an exaggeration to say that IFS has a good chance to "stir things up" in the psychotherapy world. Insightful assumptions and unique techniques that are a part of this model are like a breath of fresh air, in comparison to other therapeutic systems, which effectiveness can be questioned.

In what ways does IFS differ from other models of psychotherapy?

IFS vs other psychotherapy models

Looking at our personality as a being consisting of many parts is nothing new. How is IFS different? There's many points, but the following 3 are the most important:

1. Discovering relationships between parts



Contrary to other therapeutic systems which consider working with subpersonalities, IFS focuses not only on particular parts, but most of all on the relationships between them. So the whole system is important, our internal family.

Noticing the key meaning of relationships between individual parts was possible for Schwartz mainly because of his practice as a family therapist. When he applied his knowledge about family systems to the inner world, he understood, that looking at relations between particular parts of personality helps us to learn the source of many troubles people struggle with.

It seems that it is hard to understand the actions of one subpersonality (and also to help it change its role and function in the system) in separation with other parts, with which it can be in conflict with, which it can try to protect or be protected by.

Even therapies most focused on working with subpersonalities (Voice Dialogue, Transactional Analysis, Gestalt therapy) don't pay attention to the relationships created between the parts of the personality.

2. Creating relationships with parts and supporting them

The most important thing in many systems working with parts is interacting with what lives within us. Jung wrote about it, Perls (Gestalt therapy, empty chair technique) practised it, Hal and Sandra Stone (Voice Dialogue) talked about it.

But only IFS has the goal of A) establishing deeper relationships with our parts and B) supporting them in freeing themselves from blockades, emotional baggage and the roles they serve.

A) What does it mean to establish a relationship with a part? The members of our internal family can like or dislike us, they can trust or mistrust us, they may want to talk with us, or not. Just like with people we meet in the outside world, we can come into various relationships with our inner parts. A good relationship with members of this internal society is key in IFS therapy, because only when they are open to dialogue they will tell us what they are afraid of, what they run away from, what they desire and who they protect. Only then they are willing to cooperate with other parts.

B) IFS not only comes into dialogue and builds relationships with parts we find in ourselves. In this approach it is important to help the parts. Some of them need support to free themselves from their destructive roles (Perfectionist or Inner Critic), and others need support from their emotions or beliefs they learned through various experiences in the past (guilt, grief, regret or beliefs like "I'm not worthy of love"). To this end Schwartz created a process called "unburdening"

3. The Self, detaching from parts

Schwartz discovered that the biggest obstacle in making relationships with each part are other parts which burden us with fear, anger or regret.

For example, when he asked one of his clients what is his attitude towards his Inner Critic, the client replied "I'm mad at him". In IFS it means that through the client spoke a part which feels anger towards the Critic and the client judges the Critic from the perspective of this part.

When Schwartz began to ask his clients to ask those judging parts to move aside, they entered a state of full openness, curiosity, peace and compassion - towards the part they wanted to work with. This was a state in which they didn't identify with any part - they found some space for awareness and deep peace. Being in this state made creating relationships much easier and understanding the core of the problem - much quicker.

The founder of IFS called this state "Self" and described it as a state of mind, which is full of empathy and curiosity - a state in which we know what is good for all our parts. Every one of us has a Self in the core of our existence. Even people who went through heavy trauma or those afflicted with psychological disorders. According to Schwartz, Self is characterized by "8 C": Compassion, Curiosity, Calm, Clarity, Courage, Connectedness, Confidence, Creativity.

Self is different from all other parts we have. It is both one of the parts (an active internal leader for other parts, with a broader perspective) and a higher state of consciousness. Achieving access to this state is often the first and the most important step of IFS therapy. Without this, effective work with parts proves to be difficult or even impossible.

Self is a state, which, except for the "8 C" has an inner wisdom about how to relate to other parts of personality in a harmonized, loving way. It is this aspect of our psyche which is responsible for the ability to self heal.

In IFS it is the Self that is the fragment of our psyche which meets each part and builds relationships with them. The more the subpersonalities trust the Self, the more space they give him to be a leader of the system and the more harmony we experience. The role of the therapist is to help the client enter the Self and, from this perspective, interact with members of the internal family. Thanks to this, the client doesn't become reliant on the therapist.

The great trinity

Another difference between IFS and other systems of psychotherapy is highlighting of the 3 types of subpersonalities which live in our internal family. They are 1. Exiles, 2. Managers and 3. Firefighters.

1. Exiles

They are those parts of personality, who (usually during childhood) were in some way hurt and then they were “frozen in time” in a particular memory, carrying within them various emotional baggage. Getting through to them and freeing them from this baggage is the main goal of IFS, however it doesn’t always happen from the beginning. To be able to meet the exiles we need the approval of managers - the parts which are responsible for the protection or imprisonment of the exiles in the dark cellars of our subconscious mind.

Many of us have quite a lot of these parts, without even knowing about them. We are raised to negate our weaknesses and troubling feelings. That’s why we are prone to trauma - when some parts of us suffer, we deny them, and what comes next - they not only suffer, but are also abandoned. This way, they become exiles.



For this to happen, we don't need any "typical" big trauma (like abuse by our parents, death of a close relative or rape). Sometimes even simple events (a comment from a teacher, being left alone for a few hours by our parents) can become a wound that will later influence us for the whole life.

Even though we don't consciously remember, it influences us all the time - we experience it as lessened self-esteem, fear of failure or other emotional blockades, which are not a mental disorder, but still prevent us from living in harmony and satisfaction.

2. Menadżerowie

The exiles do everything they can to be noticed, that's why they will constantly bring up memories and emotions, reminding us about them - so that we pay attention to them and take care of them. Sometimes they even flood us with troubling emotions and that's what the managers fear most. Their role is to keep our psyche stable and that's why they try to do whatever they can to enable us to function in our reality without constant breakdowns. They are the part which drives our everyday life.



The main goal of managers is to keep the exiles imprisoned for their own good and for the good of our whole psyche. They prevent the activation of those parts in various ways - their favourite tools are: phobias, obsessions, compulsions, passivity, emotional indifference, panic attacks, depression, hyperactivity, nightmares.

The most common managers are:

- Controller - the part which wants to have control over everything, because it believes that any kind of surprise will unleash emotions connected to a wound,
- Perfectionist - when he will be perfect, no one will reject him and so - he will not recall any troubling emotions of abandonment,
- Passive Pessimist - he avoids interpersonal interaction through passivity and withdrawal, so that he won't be close to other people (closeness can unleash denied, troubling emotions),
- Caregiver - he cares for everyone around, but not for himself, and uses this as a strategy to run away from his own emotions.

An important discovery by Schwartz, mostly about managers, is that the dominant behaviour of those parts is not their essence, but rather an extreme role they were put into. For example - Inner Critic doesn't need to be a critic, his role is different - to motivate - when we are able to communicate with him and show him the damage he does with his criticism.

The change happens fastest when, during the IFS therapy, we slowly allow the exiles to free themselves from their emotional baggage. Then, the managers no longer need to protect us from the emotions which were dangerous before - because they were healed. In this moment the managers usually easily change their way of influencing us and we experience it as a lasting change on a deep level.

3. firefighters

There are situations, in which managers can't keep the exiles in their cages. Then, emotions overwhelm us and this is a fire that needs to be extinguished quickly. In those moments the firefighters come to the forefront of our mind - the parts that want to ease and soothe the troubling emotions.

Firefighters have the same goal as managers, but different roles and strategies. Managers are proactive (they prevent the emotions of going outside), but firefighters are reactive (they act, when the damage is already done).

They are responsible for addictions. Using various forms of substances is the easiest way to quench a fire. The most common strategies are: binge eating, eating sweets, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, watching pornography, gambling or shopping.

What's interesting is that firefighters come during the process of therapy. When the person, with the help of a therapist, starts getting close to the troubling emotions (and starts coming into contact with the exile) the firefighter comes and creates psychophysiological reactions like sleepiness, dizziness, distraction - everything that can help run away from what is important.



In summary, these are the most important assumptions of IFS therapy:

- We all have parts that create our internal family,
- We all have access to Self - a state in which we don't identify with any part,
- Every part is good in itself and has positive intention. There are no "bad" parts, which would need to be eliminated,
- Our subpersonalities create a complex system of relationships between them.

IFS in self-growth and as a psychotherapy

IFS works great both for people who are completely healthy and those that suffer from various disorders. In the first case, therapy can be about low self-esteem, chronic stress, impulsive anger, deep sadness or regret, dealing with bereavement, fear of failure, fear of intimacy, shyness and many other problems with destructive emotions or limiting beliefs.

In the second case, IFS method can be used to work with:

- Trauma
- Depression
- Addiction
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Compulsive behaviours
- Phobias
- Neurosis (anxiety)
- Bipolar disorder
- Anorexia and bulimia

The method can be used for individual therapy, but also couples, family and group therapy.

The good news is that working with a therapist is not the only option to use the IFS method. Richard Schwartz also encourages autotherapy (self-work in your own home), but it's worth to know the model and its techniques well to make autotherapy possible and safe.

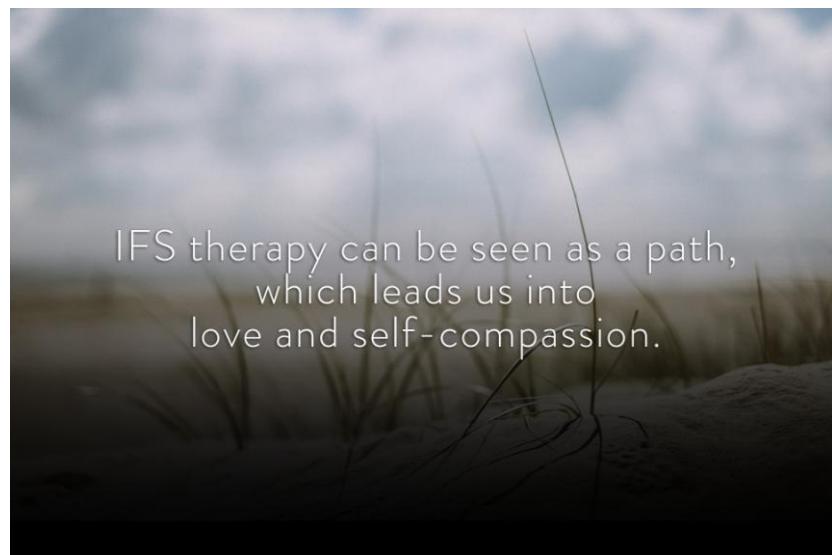
Jay Earley wrote a long-titled book “Self-Therapy: A Step-By-Step Guide to Creating Wholeness and Healing Your Inner Child Using IFS, A New, Cutting-Edge Psychotherapy”. In this book he shows how we can use IFS for ourselves.

Since 2015 Internal Family Systems therapy is an evidence based psychotherapy according to NREPP (National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices). This registry was created by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) which is a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

IFS was judged as effective for improving general functioning and well-being and as promising for reducing phobia, panic, and generalized anxiety disorders and also for improving physical health conditions, psychological resilience and treating depression.

It's important to mention, that although during the IFS therapy we deal with particular problems or emotions of a person, who searches for inner change, each session brings more, far-reaching, positive "side effects".

When we learn to listen to parts of our personality with openness and compassion (without judging or trying to change them), our relationship with ourselves changes. We acquire the ability to "detach" from our emotions and to observe them with curiosity and acceptance. We experience greater inner harmony and achieve greater emotional stability.



Every dialogue with a part of our subpersonality is an occasion to understand and love another fragment of yourself. The whole process can be an opportunity for deep and lasting transformation of how we perceive ourselves.

From my point of view the Internal Family Systems model is much more than a method of psychotherapy. It's a way to experience yourself, a way to experience people around you and to experience life itself.

How does IFS therapy look like in practice?

Every IFS session is like a tiny trip deep into yourself, where you experience a slightly different state of awareness. You briefly remove yourself from the outside world and focus inwards seeing all the nooks and crannies inside your own subconscious mind.

For many it's quite an intensive experience after which you can hear words like: "I just touched something deep and important".

In most cases IFS therapy is a process, during which you have your eyes closed. The role of the therapist is to guide you in establishing connections with particular parts, to help you converse or negotiate with them, to free the hurt parts from their burden. In some situations the therapist can use different techniques in which - instead of communicating with your parts by yourself - you act as if you are that part, by sitting on a chair. Then you go into a dialogue with the therapist from the perspective of your part (the "direct access" technique).



After the initial assessment and learning about your most important parts and the relations between them, the therapist will ask you to find the feelings you want to look at, which influence you in a negative way, or which are connected to the problem you want to work with. After you focus your attention on the feeling, he will ask you what image comes into your mind. People see their parts in various ways - sometimes cartoon characters, other times their parents or loved ones, sometimes items like chains, balls, carrots or clouds.

When you see the visual representation of this part, the therapist will begin guiding you through a dialogue with this part, proposing some questions and following what happens inside you. This process happens in a trance-like state. Your whole focus is put inwards.

The therapist may ask you to ask your parts questions such as:

- What is your role? Why do you do what you do?
- What are you afraid would happen, if you stopped doing your role?
- What other part are you protecting?
- With which part are you in conflict with?
- What would have to happen to make you stop influencing part X?

Each of those questions allows you to better understand the essence of a particular part and also the dynamics of your inner world. The fascinating this is that you don't need to consciously look for answers to those questions.

When you have good contact with your parts (everyone, no exceptions, can have a good contact with his or hers internal family, sometimes you just need to learn it), the answers appear spontaneously. We know full well when the answer comes from the part we are speaking with.

It's surprising how quickly and easily people recognize their parts of personality. When they break through the illusion of oneness of personality, the focus on subpersonalities becomes easy, the idea of multiplicity of mind begins to make great, intuitive sense.

Step one: relationship and trust

One of the most important goals of IFS therapy is reaching the exiles, and then healing them by releasing them from the burden they carry (and through taking them out of the past they are stuck in). This element brings the most important changes in the inner world. A side goal of the therapy is gaining access to the state of Self and distinguishing it from other parts, so that Self can become the leader for the whole internal family. When both those goal are realized, the client - step by step - discovers a great feeling of harmony, which radiates throughout his whole daily life.

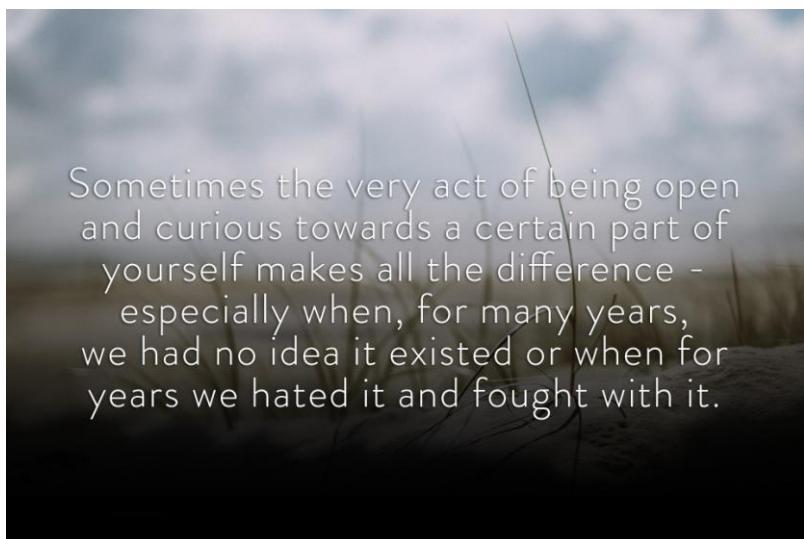
But before the meeting with exiles becomes possible, the client has an important task to fulfill. It's creating a good relationship with managers, who have a tough but important task. As I wrote earlier, this group protects or "imprisons" the exiles. Reaching the exiles without a care for managers can harm the client (treating the managers with contempt can lead to them becoming even more extreme in their actions).



That's why we can make the next step in therapy only after we gain the trust of a manager and when he allows us to meet the exile. There are many important reasons for this, but there is no space here to go into them. Caring for the safety of the whole system is key in IFS and there are plenty of elements in the process that support this.

Of course, not every session leads to getting access to exiles or freeing them from the prison they are in. You can't always establish a relationship or gain the trust of a manager or firefighter. Each problem is different, each inner family is different and each client has a different rhythm of work. If the problem is tougher or if the mental disorder is deeper, establishing a relationship with a part can require multiple sessions.

Despite this, every meeting with members of this inner community brings us greater awareness, better understanding of ourselves and greater feeling of harmony.



What's interesting, after an IFS session we can sometimes experience a so-called "change in system". It's a slight discomfort, because "bricks" in the mind were moved. If you wore braces it can feel similar to the process of tightening, when the dentist corrects teeth placement and we begin to get used to it after a few days of slight discomfort.

Similar thing happens when we change our beliefs or free ourselves from difficult emotions in IFS - something we wore for many years in our head or body suddenly disappears - and you have to get used to this new, slightly alien, system.

Sometimes after a good IFS session, the clients Inner Sceptic appears and says: "this was too easy to be true/effective/lasting." It's a natural reaction, because we are not used to having deep changes in such a short amount of time. For therapists working with Internal Family Systems model it's a common occurrence.

Internal Family Systems around the world

The IFS model gains more and more recognition around the world. Richard Schwartz gives lectures at major conferences about trauma and mental health, where he shares his discoveries. IFS therapist training gathers more people years, which can be seen mostly in USA and UK.

When I learned about this model of therapy I began reading all the books about IFS that I could find. After getting a solid base of knowledge about how IFS looks in practice, time came for months of experiments - both self-practice (in the form of autotherapy) and as a therapist for my friends and people who agreed to be my "lab rats". I owe a great deal to my autotherapy. I will never forget how, lying in bed during one of my stays in Bali, Indonesia, I looked inside myself to find a small boy, bound by rope, all trembling with fear. Taking care of this part of myself and freeing it from the ropes brought a great change in the area of my relationships. I feel the effects of this change to this day.

Practicing IFS in the role of a therapist to support other people brought effects that exceeded my expectations. Soon I felt that's what I was looking for. It became clear that I found an approach which resonates with me fully and gives me great possibilities to help other people.

At this moment I have the greatest pleasure to be attending a 3-year education process, at the end of which I will be certified (the training happens in UK, Bristol). Even though I don't yet have the title of "IFS therapist", at the level of the training I am at now, I can use the methods [to help people I work with.](#)



I feel excited because I can show you something I believe in so strongly and what can become a worthwhile element of your own travels into yourself.

In the near future I plan to create a webpage with informations about IFS therapy and a series of films speaking about particular aspects of the model in more depth. I will also lead an introductory training workshop about the IFS method, both for future therapist, people who want to work with their clients using this method and those who want to use it for themselves.

If you want to read more about this method right now, take a look at the official site [The Center for Self Leadership.](#)

The information I provided in this article is a drop in the ocean of what we already know about the functioning of our inner families and how to help them achieve balance, fulfillment and harmony.

I will gladly answer any of your questions about the IFS model, so if any come to you - leave a comment.

Self-therapy with IFS

Although self-work with your internal family might not bring you as spectacular results as individual work with the IFS therapist, it can surely build foundation for your personal development. Self-therapy with IFS offers great opportunities, according to me, much greater than any other method of self-work.

In order to start with it, you don't need to know everything about IFS Model. What I will share with you here is a set of simple exercises which will allow you to discover parts of yourself now. At the same time, however, you need to keep in mind that IFS Model is a very broad and complex approach to psychotherapy, which is why it's good to pick one of the workshops or read some literature on specific aspects of this type of therapy (I will elaborate on that at the very end of this e-book).

Road to self-leadership

How can you benefit from self-therapy with IFS method? It can be applied to many fields of self-work starting from such issues as shyness, developing your self-confidence and self-esteem, through various types of stress and anxiety, to a sense of guilt, frustration, anger and grief.

Basically, anything that still internally burdens or blocks you in any way can be released by working with IFS. This refers to self-therapy with IFS, as when working with a psychotherapist the spectrum of issues that can be dealt with is much broader encompassing all sorts of mental disorders and diseases, from depression through neuroses to deep traumas.

Importantly, apart from sorting out specific problems that keep holding you back, working on your internal family brings numerous positive "side effects", which can substantially improve the quality of your life and increase the level of happiness and inner harmony.

The set of these sought-after side effects, which I named “6 x Self”, includes:

1. Self-discovery
2. Self-awareness
3. Self-understanding
4. Self-acceptance
5. Self-compassion
6. Self-leadership

Each of these “-self”s stands for a certain milestone on the road to your personal emotional freedom. When you start to meet with your parts, you begin to get to know your internal world better (Self-discovery). You begin to notice more and find links between what you are experiencing in your everyday life and what is going on in your mind (self-awareness).

What comes in next is a greater understanding of the mechanisms according to which your psyche works (self-understanding). With understanding comes consideration and empathy, which in turn allow you to accept yourself together with the hardest and most destructive parts of your personality (self-acceptance). Followed by learning to open your heart more to what is difficult, scared and wounded inside you, you begin to understand on a deeper level and sympathize with those “exiled” parts of your personality (self-compassion). A long-term effect of working with IFS model is a state of trust that all your parts have for your Self, e.g. that aspect of your consciousness which does not identify with any of the subpersonalities but is a head of your whole internal family (self-leadership). It is a state of deep inner harmony and serenity.

Discovering parts of self

Let's get down to some practice. In order to set off on your personal journey with IFS, first you need to learn to see the parts of yourself. It's quite easy, nevertheless, it requires a dash of mindfulness and curiosity.

Step 1: As you already know, each emotion you feel, each sensation you experience in your body, each image or thought that comes to your head can result from the activity of one of your parts.

Noticing your thoughts and feelings is like looking at the trailheads to get to the bottom of that part of yourself that you haven't even realised that it's even there. Trailheads in IFS are all the signs that indicate the activity of parts of yourself. You experience them many times everyday - at one time they might come from two or three parts, at the other time - from a few more or even several.

Two things you will need to equip yourself with are a piece of paper (or notebook) and a pen. Alternatively, you can use one of the generally available smartphone apps for making notes. From the very morning, psych yourself up for watching closely yourself and your internal world.

Throughout the day, keep asking yourself these two questions:

- How are you feeling right now?
- What are you thinking right now?

Write down all your answers to the above questions. If you notice that you feel bored or frustrated with your colleague at work, write it down. If you catch yourself thinking that it's high time to realize your dream which has been put aside for years, guess what? Of course, write it down, too.

It's important that you give yourself two or three days for making such observations. Pick as much valuable information on whatever you're experiencing inside yourself. Many of these sensations will reveal the activity of specific parts of your personality.

When you see that you have gathered enough observations in your note, which are needed for making the next step, you can move on to the stage of mapping yourself.

Step 2: Now we will group the thoughts and emotions that you have written down. Sometimes one part can influence you in many different ways. For instance, Inner Critic can criticize you in million various ways, evoking more than one emotion simultaneously (e.g. feeling of pressure and self-contempt). Other parts can influence you in a very concrete and fixed way, e.g. the scared part can evoke fear and prompt you to repeat to yourself the same old thing: "Don't do this or you'll be sorry."

Go though your list and see how much you can compress it by summing up and grouping the emotions and thoughts that are alike or somehow similar. You might find there a couple of different thoughts that come from the same one part. Then, you make a new list: you name each part of yourself using one or two words and write them down in a column.

For instance, if you keep telling yourself “Just do it already!” or “Try harder” and with both these thoughts come the feelings of self-imposed pressure and inner coercion, you can place these elements in one group labelled “Pressure” or “Coercion”. We will consider that as a part of your personality.

Don’t worry whether you group the things you discovered in yourself appropriately. Do it at a rough guess.

Even if you put in the same group the emotions or thoughts that come from two different parts, you will find out about it further in the self-therapy process.

Exemplary list of parts/emotions could look like that:

- Pressure
- Urge for a mid-career change
- Inner critic
- Urge to socialize
- Perfectionism
- Fear of failure
- Joy

It doesn’t matter how you call these parts as long as their names are clear to you.

Gathering information on your inner parts

Richard Schwartz puts forward a few questions that might help gather some information on the inner part that we want to work with, even before we look inside ourselves and meet with this part.

I recommend this way to everyone who is new to working with the IFS model. Such approach not only expands our awareness and prepares us for the self-therapy process but also lays foundation for good communication with our inner parts.

Step 3: Now pick one of the parts from your list. Close your eyes and give yourself a few moments to think about those situations in your life when you hear the thoughts and feel the emotions that come from this part. Pay attention to how you are feeling and what is going on in your head at that moment. Next, ask yourself the following questions (write down the answers on a separate piece of paper):

1. How do you feel about this part?
2. How does it affect you in your everyday life?
3. How often does it show?
4. To what extent can you control it?
5. To what extent does it control you?
6. How would you like your relation with this part change?
7. Is it an exile, a manager or a firefighter?

After finding the answers to these questions, start to observe yourself during the day and pay attention to the following aspects:

- When and where is that part activated? And by whom? (For example: Your Inner Child, who carries a lot of shame, can be activated whenever you get critical comments from one of your parents)
- How does its activity affect you? (i.e. How does it feel in your body? What thoughts come to your head? How long is this part active?)
- To what extent are you able to calm it down on your own? (What do you do to achieve that? Is it effective?)

Make sure you write down all your revelations and keep adding new things whenever you notice them. Such constant moment-to-moment observation will allow you to gather even more information on how each of your inner parts works.

I encourage you to look closely at your inner parts for the next couple of days, or even weeks, regardless of what the next stages of your self-work will look like. The more observations you make, the better you are going to know and understand yourself.

Step 5: The goal of this stage is your first encounter with your inner parts and getting in touch with them. In a moment, you are going to do a simple exercise which is to help you connect with one of your subpersonalities.

Keep in mind that communicating with your inner parts is something new to you and, at first, can seem quite strange. You might hear the voice of a Sceptic in your head who will tell you that “it doesn’t make any sense” or “you are not going to find anything there”. Embrace all the doubts of the sceptic part of yourself, say thanks to it for expressing how you really feel and think and ask it to step aside and give you the chance to try.

Treat this exercise as an experiment and approach the encounters with your inner parts with curiosity. You never know what you will discover in your inner world. Even if you don't get to make contact with any of your inner voices, it's ok - it is quite likely that you with each next attempt you will get better results.

Before doing this exercise, carefully read the instructions below. This way, later on, when doing the exercises you will be able to open your eyes and go back to the specific stages of the process.

1. Pick from the list the inner part that you want to meet with.
2. Sit comfortably, close your eyes and take a deep breath to calm yourself down.
3. Direct all your attention towards the inside. Pay attention to how you are feeling in your body. Give yourself a few moments to scan your whole body and get in touch with it.
4. Give yourself as much time as you need to evoke the inner part you want to explore. Sometimes it is enough that you get in tune with the emotions that part is triggering or listen to the thoughts that it is sending you. At other times, it might be worth to recall a situation when that part was active. It can help to evoke the sensations that associate with it.
5. Note where in your body you experience these sensations (or from where the voice comes). Direct all your attention to that area and hold on to this sensation or voice for a few moments. Watch it closely, without rushing it.
6. Check whether your imagination creates any image of this part. If you were to visualize it as some kind of shape, colour, object or figure, what would it be? Don't consciously look for such an image - simply see whether it emerges of its own accord, spontaneously (if it doesn't, don't worry - you can continue with the process just as well without visualizing the chosen part - not everyone can assign an image to their inner parts)
7. How are you feeling about this part? In order to start a dialogue with it, it's good to be calm, curious and open - this attitude is characteristic for the energy of Self. If you are afraid of this part, or angry with it, or have any other emotions about it (different from serenity, curiosity and openness), direct all your attention on this emotion and ask it to step aside.
8. If that part does NOT step aside, repeat step 7. Do it as many times as you need to finally look at your inner part with curiosity and openness. If any of the "anxious" parts (that's how we call the parts that judge the part that we want to meet with) does not want to step aside, write it down on a piece of paper, make it your "target" part (the one you want to get in touch with) and start the whole process from Step 1.

9. Now, as you are ready to make contact with your inner part, see whether it is aware of your presence, in other words: does it realize that you are there, right beside it? If not, let it know you're there (call out its name, come closer or touch it gently on the arm).
10. Ask that inner part about what it wants to tell you. Let it speak and listen carefully to everything it has to say. When it's done, ask if there is anything else it wants to share with you.
11. Ask your inner part about the role it plays in your life. Why is it there? Why does it affect you in such a way?
When you get the answer, you might want to ask further: what does it take out of this? This way, you will be able to know the intentions of this part.
12. Say thanks to this part for what it does. Acknowledge and appreciate its effort and intention, even if it is bad for you in any way. Note how this part reacts to your words of gratitude.
13. Ask your inner part what it thinks would happen if it didn't fulfill its role. It is a very important question. Listen carefully to what your part has to say about it as this might reveal things that you haven't been aware of yet.
14. Ask what that part needs from you. If you can, give it what it wants right away (sometimes the inner parts need to be listened or hugged; at other times they will ask you to do something in the external world).
15. Ask your inner part whether it has anything else to add at this point or maybe needs to meet with you one more time at some time in the future.
16. Say thanks to your inner part for this encounter and say goodbye.
17. Open your eyes and write down conclusions from this exercise.

Here are some guidelines, which might help you take even more out of this exercise:

- Pay special attention to step 7. The relationships you have with your subpersonalities can differ. You will be afraid of some, you will hate some. But there will also be inner parts that you like, appreciate and admire. Defining your feelings towards the specific subpersonality and understanding your attitude ("Why am I so biased about that part?") can make it easier to put aside (at least for the time of completing this exercise) those emotions which could become an obstacle to communication.
- Say hello to your inner part and say it with love, openness and acceptance. It's not always easy. But remember that it is a part of you and the more mean it seems, the more love it needs. Your good energy will have a positive impact on the whole conversation and open both parties to mutual understanding.

- Engage in the dialogue as if it was an important conversation with your close one. Don't neglect the part you are meeting with and take it seriously. Listen carefully to everything it has to say and share your true thoughts and feelings.
- Don't try to control the process. Don't think what should or should not happen. The whole beauty of this method lies in the fact that each encounter is unique and you never know what to expect. Accept whatever comes, even if it seems strange or abstract for you. Open up to the multiplicity of your subpersonalities and let yourself go with the flow of this process.
- Feel free to experiment. Ask various questions, direct the conversation on multiple subjects and see what effects it brings. In this way, you will learn very fast what communication approach brings you closer to coming to terms with your inner part and reach some kind of a consensus.
- Step 13 is about finding the answer that can make another part of your psyche come out. Most often it will be a part called a manager with which the explored part is in conflict, or a part called an exile, which is protected by it. In the first case, it's good to face that part, too. In the other case, I would advise to stay sharp because making contact with the exile when the manager is not ready for that yet might make you lose the manager's trust.
- If the subpersonality doesn't want to talk, ask it why. You might want to try to resolve its doubts and ensure of your good intentions. Say that you don't want to criticize it or get rid of it. Say that you only want to get to know and understand it better. If it doesn't work, ask that part what would have to happen in order for it to feel like talking.
- Each encounter is a step forward, even if no consensus is reached. The very fact of getting in touch with that particular part is a huge step forward.

All that you will learn during such exercise about this part and about yourself in general is very precious. Keep on meeting with your inner parts and making notes. Doing these exercises with all the parts you put on the list is going to take you a while. At this stage, it is all you need to better know, understand and accept yourself.

What now?

What are the next steps in exploring your internal family?

- Make contact with those inner parts that are not ready for this yet.
- Differentiate from the parts that take over the whole personality and tap into the energy of the Self.

- Develop and nurture the relationships with your inner parts and build mutual trust.
- Come to terms with your inner parts.
- Resolve conflicts between polarized parts.
- Identify exiles protected by managers.
- Free the exiles from the memories, in which the exiles are frozen, and lift the burdens that come from the situations in which they were imposed.
- And many many more things you can do to make your internal family live in harmony.

When you feel you know your inner parts better and are ready for taking up the above described challenges, here's what you can do:

- Look into the literature on IFS, which I enlist at the end of this e-book.
- Sign up for a 2-day workshop "Introduction to Internal Family Systems", which I regularly run in Poznan and other cities in Poland.
- Take up your individual IFS psychotherapy. A list of certified psychotherapists working with the IFS model is available [here](#).
- Join the IFS Polska community on Facebook. This is where you can ask questions, which I will gladly answer, and share your experiences with other members of the group.

There are plenty of opportunities. What's important is that you choose the things that fit you and that you are curious about.

Getting to know your internal family is a unique adventure and can be the starting point of many big changes in your life. Remember that practice is the foundation of any lasting change, so be sure to get back to the exercises described in this e-book and continue to face your various inner parts

In the meantime, I wish you an inspiring journey into yourself!

Michael Pasterski



List of references

Here are the books I read when learning the **Internal Family Systems Model** and can recommend with all my heart.

- “Internal Family System” - Richard Schwartz

The only book on IFS translated into Polish so far (original title: “Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model”). It is a short introduction into the IFS Model, perfect for those who want to learn more about the method without getting into too many details. Worth recommending to people who don’t know much about IFS but are interested in this subject and would like to learn more.

- “Internal Family Systems Therapy” - Richard Schwartz

It is said to be the most important book on IFS. Published over 20 years ago, it’s awaiting its new, updated edition. Schwartz presents the IFS model in detail, including its theoretical assumptions and an extensive description of the whole process. Targeted at people who want to use the IFS method in their psychotherapy work with others.

- “Many Minds, One Self” - Richard Schwartz; Robert R. Falconer

It’s about the shift from the mono-mind paradigm to multiple mind paradigm. It depicts how the way we think about our mind has changed throughout the years in such fields as philosophy, psychology and neuroscience. The second part of the book is devoted to the concepts present in various religions and spiritual approaches and consistent with the energy of Self. Good for those who want to expand their knowledge on the theoretical foundation of the IFS model.

- “Intimacy from the Inside Out” - Toni Herbine-Blank, Donna Kerpelman, Martha Sweezy

Couple therapy with the IFS model.

- “Internal Family Systems: Skills Training Manual” - Frank G. Anderson, MD, Martha Sweezy, PhD and Richard C. Schwartz, PhD

A truly practical piece of literature to use in developing skills to use the IFS model in therapeutic work. It provides many exercises and transcripts of sample therapeutic sessions.

- “You Are the One You’ve Been Waiting For, Bringing Courageous Love To Intimate Relationships” - Richard Schwartz

A marvellous book on relationships and how IFS can help us build healthy relationships. Its main assumption is that we should not build relationships expecting from the other party to take care of the parts of our personality that need attention, instead, we should learn to take care of our inner parts on our own and enter into a relationship feeling whole and complete. The book is currently being translated into Polish and will soon be published in Poland.

- “Self-Therapy: A Step-By-Step Guide to Creating Wholeness and Healing Your Inner Child Using IFS. A New, Cutting-Edge Psychotherapy” - Jay Earley

An extensive, comprehensible book on the basics of IFS in the context of self-therapy. It has a nice flow and is pleasant to read. Good for both those who want to use the IFS method on their own at home and those who want to learn something more about IFS than just the general information. It has been followed by two sequels “Self-therapy Vol. 2” and “Self-therapy Vol. 3”.

- “Internal Family Systems with Children” - Lisa Spiegel

The book about how the IFS model can change the way we perceive relations between parents and children and how to help children to get to know and understand their inner parts. The book is currently being translated into Polish and will soon be published in Poland.

- “Innovations and Elaborations in Internal Family Systems Therapy” and “Internal Family Systems Therapy: New Dimensions” - edited by Martha Sweezy and Ellen Ziskind

Both books are anthologies of articles written by various IFS therapists, introducing new perspectives and innovative solutions. For those who are familiar with the IFS model.

- “Freedom from Your Inner Critic. A Self-Therapy Approach” - Jay Earley

The book presents the 7 types of the inner critic and ways to deal with them.

All the above pieces of literature are available for purchase on the Centre for Leadership website (www.selfleadership.org/ifs-store.html) as both print books and e-books, as well as on Amazon.