

Chapter 1

BASIC IFS CONCEPTS

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a relatively new form of therapy that is compassionate, inclusive, spiritual, powerfully healing, and deeply respectful of our inner life. IFS recognizes that our psyches are made up of different parts, sometimes called subpersonalities. You can think of them as little people inside us. Each part has its own perspective, feelings, memories, goals, and motivations. For example, one part of you might be trying to lose weight, and another part might want to eat whatever it wants. We can all recognize parts like the Inner Critic, the Abandoned Child, the Pleaser, the Angry Part, and the Loving Caretaker.

Parts have motivations for everything they do. Nothing is done just out of habit. Nothing is just a pattern of thinking or behavior that you learned. Everything (except for purely physiological reactions) is done by a part for a reason, even though that reason may be unconscious.

Understanding parts in this way gives you a great deal of power to change your inner system. It means that there is an understandable rationale for your behavior, feelings, and attitudes. It is possible to get to know these parts, develop relationships with them, and help them heal. Once healed, they no longer need to behave in ways that seem at odds with your intentions, values, and goals. The possibility for harmonious integration is real.

Richard Schwartz, PhD, in developing the IFS method, discovered that every part has a positive intent for you, no matter how problematic its behavior. For example, Bill had a part that was judgmental and competitive with other people in a way that was not consistent with his true values. However, when he really got to know that part, he discovered that it was just trying to help him feel OK about himself in the only way it knew how—by feeling superior to others.

Understanding that a part has positive intent doesn't mean that you give the part power. Bill doesn't want his part to act out being judgmental and competitive. Using

the IFS approach, Bill can relate to this part with understanding and appreciation while also taking the steps to heal it.

This approach is fundamentally different from the way we ordinarily relate to our parts. Usually when we become aware of a part, the first thing we do is evaluate it. Is it good or bad for us? If we decide it is good, we embrace it and give it power. If we decide it is bad, we try to suppress it or get rid of it. The truth is, you can't get rid of a part. You can only push it into the deeper layers of your psyche, where it will continue to affect you without your awareness.

In IFS, we do something altogether different and radical. We welcome all our parts with curiosity and compassion. We seek to understand them and appreciate their efforts to help us. We develop a relationship of caring and trust with each part and then take the steps to release it from its burdens so it can function in a healthy way.

In the IFS system, Protectors are the parts you usually encounter first in exploring yourself. Their job is to handle the world, protect you, and keep you functioning. They interact in a reasonable, strategic way with the people, responsibilities, and situations in your environment. The other main function of these parts is to protect you from the pain of the Exiles. These are young child parts that hold the pain from the past. They are generally exiled, or kept out of consciousness, by the Protectors.

In the above example, Bill had a Protector that was competitive and judgmental toward others. It was trying to help Bill feel superior in order to protect against an Exile Part that felt inadequate. The Exile Part had probably suffered some kind of humiliation or rejection in the past that left it feeling unworthy.

Parts take on these dysfunctional roles because of what has happened to them in the past. Exiles take on pain and burdens from what they experienced as children. Protectors take on their roles in order to protect Exiles or to protect you from the pain of Exiles.

The IFS Process

IFS has a method of understanding and working with these parts to release the burdens they carry from the past and heal the system so you can function in healthy ways. The key to this healing is the Self. IFS recognizes that each of us has a spiritual center—a true Self. This Self is naturally compassionate and curious about people,

especially about our own parts. The Self wants to connect with each part and get to know and understand it. The Self feels compassion for the pain of the Exiles and the burdens of pain that they carry. It also has compassion for the Protectors and the tough jobs they take on trying to keep the Exiles from being reinjured or exposed. The Self is able to stay calm and centered despite the sometimes intense emotions that parts may feel. Everyone has a Self, even though you may feel that yours is not very accessible at times because of the activity of your parts.

The Self is the agent of healing—the true leader of the internal system that can love and heal each part. The first step in the IFS process is learning how to access the Self. Then the Self focuses its energy on the part. In Bill's case, he started out his IFS work by focusing on his Judgmental Part. With some work, he was able to be genuinely in his Self so that he was interested in getting to know the Judgmental Part. He found out that it was trying to protect an Exile Part of him that felt inadequate. Bill had a learning problem as a child, even though he is quite intelligent and competent. So there was a young part of Bill that had felt inadequate in school. The Judgmental Part was trying to compensate for this inadequate experience by feeling superior to people. Bill had grown up in a judgmental, competitive home, so that was the primary model this part knew. As Bill got to know the Judgmental Part, he understood why this part acted as it did and appreciated its efforts on his behalf.

He then contacted the Exile who felt inadequate. He listened and watched as this part showed him scenes from his childhood when it felt ashamed and inadequate because of his learning problem, and he responded to the Exile with compassion and caring. The young part responded to this by feeling cherished and valuable for the first time. Up until then, it had been hidden away in Bill's unconscious, which only increased its feelings of worthlessness. With love from Bill's Self, this young part was able to release the burden of inadequacy that it had been carrying and feel good about itself. This allowed the Judgmental Protector to relax. It no longer needed to judge people to compensate for the Exile's pain. This enabled Bill to respond to people in the way he always wanted—with openness, acceptance, and a cooperative attitude.

IFS Principles

The following are some basic principles of the Internal Family Systems Model.

These concepts underlie the work described in this workbook.

- All parts are welcome.
- You never make a part step aside or separate—you only ask.
- You respect the reasons parts have for what they are and aren't willing to do.
- All parts have positive intent at their core and ultimately want only the best for you. If they appear to have negative intent, they are using strategies that, on some level, made sense at some point in their past but are no longer effective. Getting inside their world and understanding the origin of those strategies is a key step in helping them adopt more effective strategies.
- Parts will cooperate once their fears are addressed and once they can feel you in Self and understand your intentions.
- It isn't possible to do it wrong when working on yourself using IFS. Even if your process is completely blocked, it just means that a Protector is stopping the process for some reason. You access that Protector and find out why it is behaving that way.
- The fastest way to resolve an issue is to work slowly, patiently, and respectfully with all parts involved.

Chapter 3

THE SELF

A downloadable guided meditation that facilitates getting into Self is available in MP3 format at
<http://personal-growth-programs.com/self-therapy-workbook-bonnie-weiss/>

Fortunately, human beings are not simply a collection of parts. We are so much more than that. Our true Self is mature and loving, and has the capacity to heal and integrate our parts.

We each have a core aspect of us that is our true self and our spiritual center. When our extreme parts are not activated and getting in the way, we have access to this core, which is who we really are. The Self is relaxed, open, and accepting of others and ourselves. When we are in Self, we are grounded, centered, and nonreactive. We don't get triggered by what people do. We remain calm and unruffled, even in difficult circumstances. The Self is so much larger and more spacious than our parts and is not frightened by events that would scare parts. When we are in Self, we are the shining center of the system that is each of us.

The IFS Model talks about the eight C's that are the principal qualities of the Self. They are: Compassion, Curiosity, Connection, Calm, Courage, Clarity, Caring, and Creativity. The four capacities described on the next page are the most relevant for doing an IFS session.

Self Capacities

- ♥ Compassion
- ♥ Curiosity
- ♥ Connection
- ♥ Calm



- ♥ Courage
- ♥ Clarity
- ♥ Caring
- ♥ Creativity

1. **The Self is connected.** When you are in Self, you naturally feel close to other people and want to relate in harmonious, supportive ways. You are drawn to make contact with them and to be in community. The Self also wants to be connected to your parts. When you are in Self, you are interested in having a relationship with each of your parts, which helps them trust you and opens the way for healing.
2. **The Self is curious.** When you are in Self, you are curious about other people in an open, accepting way. When you inquire into what makes them tick, it's because you want to understand them, not judge them. The Self is also curious about the inner workings of your mind. You want to understand why each part acts as it does, what its positive intent is for you, and what it is trying to protect you from. This curiosity comes from an accepting place, not a critical one. When parts sense this genuine interest, they know they are entering a welcoming environment, and they aren't afraid to reveal themselves to you.
3. **The Self is compassionate.** Compassion is a form of kindness and love that arises when people are in pain. You genuinely care about how others feel and often feel prompted to support them through difficult times. When you are in Self, you also naturally feel compassion for yourself. When parts are extreme, they're reacting to pain; Exiles feel it, and Protectors try to avoid it. Compassion toward yourself is the most essential ingredient in the inner quest for understanding. It is needed in order to hold, support, and nurture your parts while you explore your system. Your parts can sense the Self's compassion. It makes them feel safe and cared for, so they want to open up and share themselves with you.
4. **The Self is calm, centered, and grounded.** This is especially helpful when you are relating to a part that has intense emotions. Intense grief or shame, for example, can be overwhelming if you aren't grounded in Self. Protectors will avoid a part that has very strong emotions. But when you are centered in the calmness of Self, there is no need to avoid a part that is feeling intense emotion. You remain in Self while the part shows you its pain. The calmness of Self supports you through the difficult work of witnessing and healing the part.