

Internal Family Systems Therapy

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Internal Family Systems (IFS) is an approach to psychotherapy that identifies and addresses multiple sub-personalities or families within each person's mental system. These sub-personalities consist of wounded parts and painful emotions such as anger and shame, and parts that try to control and protect the person from the pain of the wounded parts. The sub-personalities are often in conflict with each other and with one's core Self, a concept that describes the confident, compassionate, whole person that is at the core of every individual. IFS focuses on healing the wounded parts and restoring mental balance and harmony by changing the dynamics that create discord among the sub-personalities and the Self.

IFS was developed by psychologist Richard Schwartz. In his work as a family therapist, Schwartz began to observe patterns in how people described their inner lives: "What I heard repeatedly were descriptions of what they often called their "parts"—the conflicted subpersonalities that resided within them," Schwartz says. He began to conceive of the mind as a family, and the parts as family members interacting with one another. Exploring how these components functioned with one another was the foundation for IFS and the idea of the core Self.

IFS therapy can treat individuals, couples, and families. It can effectively treat a variety of conditions and symptoms. These include:

IFS may not be appropriate for patients with severe mental illnesses that involve psychosis or paranoia, such as schizophrenia. Describing a person as having "parts" may be unproductive or harmful for those patients.

In 2015, IFS was designated as an evidence-based practice on the National Registry for Evidence-based Programs and Practices, a database created by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. For example, a small randomized controlled trial found that IFS could help with pain, physical functioning, depressive symptoms, and self-compassion in rheumatoid arthritis patients. Another found that IFS was effective in treating depression symptoms among a sample of young women. Still, IFS does not have as strong of an evidence base as other forms of therapy.

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IFS is talk therapy in which you work with a therapist to identify and understand the specific sub-personalities or families that make up your internal mental system. Once you identify these parts, the therapist will help you acknowledge your feelings about these suppressed emotions, learn how to release these feelings so you are freer to address the actual problem, and ultimately find more positive ways to manage conflicts on your own. The therapist may

suggest certain tools to help you do this, such as relaxation exercises, visualization, keeping a journal, and creating a chart that illustrates the relationship between Self and the different parts of you.

According to the IFS model, parts often play three common roles:

Managers: Managers are protective parts that function to control people's surroundings and manage emotions and tasks to navigate daily life.

Exiles: Exiles are parts that hold hurt, fear, or shame from early experiences, and they carry the difficult emotions and memories associated with those experiences. Managers aim to keep exiles contained and hidden from conscious awareness to avoid distress and pain.

Firefighters: Firefighters are activated when exiles produce overwhelming, painful, or threatening emotions. Firefighters aim to inhibit those difficult emotions by any means necessary, such as substance use or binge eating.

To take an example, an exiled part may be the trauma and anger of earlier abuse. These emotions are suppressed by the manager. And the firefighter may be an addiction to alcohol, which distracts the person from facing and re-experiencing those difficult emotions.

IFS also posits that everyone has a core Self, a genuine self, waiting to be accessed. The Self can identify, observe, and help these parts become less extreme, more productive, and coexist effectively.

The Self has many positive traits, according to Schwartz's model, including the eight Cs and the five Ps. The presence of these traits can help identify how much of the Self is available at a given time and how much of the Self may still need to emerge. The eight Cs are:

1. Confidence
2. Calmness
3. Creativity
4. Clarity
5. Curiosity
6. Courage
7. Compassion
8. Connectedness

The five Ps are:

1. Presence
2. Patience
3. Perspective
4. Persistence

5. Playfulness

Therapists can help patients identify their parts and release the burdens that these parts carry. To do so, they can follow a six step process:

1. **Find:** Identify the parts of your mind and body that need attention.
2. **Focus:** Pay attention to the relevant part.
3. **Flesh:** Flesh it out by describing it and your experience of it.
4. **Feel:** Explore how you feel toward this part.
5. **BeFriend:** Express curiosity about this part and accept its presence.
6. **Fear:** Ask what this part fears and what it would fear if you changed its role.

Learning to recognize and explore these parts can help patients shift how their parts function and create positive change.

According to IFS, the undamaged core Self is the essence of who you are. A person's parts can be healed, transformed, and better managed by the Self by achieving three goals of IFS:

1. Free the parts from their extreme roles
2. Restore trust in the Self
3. Coordinate and harmonize the Self and the parts, so they can work together as a team with the Self in charge

Look for a licensed psychotherapist, social worker, counselor or other mental health professional with advanced training in IFS therapy. The Internal Family Systems Center for Self-Leadership conducts training programs. Look for a therapist with IFS training. In addition to licensing and educational credentials, it is important to find a therapist with whom you are comfortable working.

References

The Center for Self Leadership. Evolution of the Internal Family Systems Model by Dr. Richard Schwartz, Ph.D.

Shadick NA, Sowell NF, Frits ML, et al. A randomized controlled trial of an internal family systems-based psychotherapeutic intervention on outcomes in rheumatoid arthritis: a proof-of-concept study. *Journal of Rheumatology*. August 2013.

Foundation for Self Leadership: IFS, an Evidence-Based Practice

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