

## The Internal Family Systems Model

The Internal Family Systems Model is both an accurate map of the personality system and a form of psychotherapy developed by Richard Schwartz that is compassionate, inclusive, spiritual, powerfully healing and deeply respectfully of our inner life.

This paper is intended to help you get to know and work with your system.



### Basic Assumptions:

- Multiplicity of the Mind: the mind consists of a number of sub-personalities or “parts”. You’ll notice this when, for example, a friend asks you to an event and you respond with, “Well a part of me wants to go but a part of me doesn’t.” We speak for our parts all the time – we just often don’t notice it.
- As we develop, parts form a system of interactions among themselves – just like a family. Some parts like each other and some parts don’t. But they all have your best interest at heart from their own perspective. If parts are in difficult positions that they don’t like (feeling overworked or not feeling good about themselves) when we pay attention to them and help the system reorganize, they can change rapidly.
- Everybody has a “Self” – has the qualities that can and should lead the internal system.
- There are no ‘bad’ parts and the goal of working with the system is not to eliminate parts but instead to help them take on the roles they would like.
- When your internal system changes then the external system changes and vice versa. For example if an angry protector part always responds to somebody asking you to do something, and you pay attention to the protector and get permission to help out the part it is protecting, (which may be feeling controlled by the other person for example) then the next time they ask you to do something you will find yourself responding differently. The angry protector no longer needs to take the lead as the part feeling “controlled” is no longer feeling burdened.

## By paying attention to your system you can:

- Feel more balanced and easy by recognising your parts; at the same time sharing your Self (Courage, creativity, clarity, compassion etc.) with them
- Guide parts to release burdens/difficult experiences and transform into their preferred roles in the system.
- Improve the quality of your relationships as you bring more Self to them.

## IFS Concepts: Self

Connectedness    Courage    Calmness  
Curiosity  
Confidence    Creativity

Self exists in everyone. It is present at birth – distinct from parts. It is the aspect of our being that is free of ego.

Compassion    Clarity



Self is the seat of consciousness, of who we are and has the qualities of a natural leader. It is the place from which we can watch, experience and be with the parts and with other people in an easy and relaxed way.

When we recognise and come from our Self we have the qualities of calmness, curiosity, connectedness, confidence, creativity, courage and clarity. When you consider people you admire and feel supported by they probably show a lot of Self energy in their relationship with you.

**Parts:** Sub-personalities/aspects of our personality



- Interact inside in ways that are similar to the ways that people interact externally. Some like each other and some don't and they all act in ways they consider good for you – unless they are exiled and in distress.
- They are experienced in a number of ways – thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, sounds, physical symptoms.
- All want something positive for you and will use different strategies to get your attention (showing up as depression, making you “space out”, doing addictive things, bursts of feelings, telling you that you “should” be different from how you are etc.)
- They are organized to protect you (Self) and to do so may take on extreme roles by either dominating or hiding (protectors). Some, like the Exiles, hold the burdens of pain and vulnerability.
- Protective parts are referred to as either Managers or Firefighters depending on if they are proactive (trying to stop a vulnerable part from being activated) or reactive (trying to distract from a vulnerable part that has been triggered).
- Exiled parts are often young parts holding extreme feelings and/or beliefs that become isolated from the rest of the system (such as “I’m worthless”).

## Managers:

These are the parts that are **pro-active** and run your day-to-day life .

They seek to maintain balance within the system by keeping us in control of every relationship and situation in an effort to prevent the feelings of the exiles - pain, shame, fear of rejection etc. coming through and taking us over. They do this in a number of ways:

- Controlling their environment, the body and others.
- People pleasing or taking care of others
- Trying to be perfect
- Criticising/Evaluating/Judging self and others
- Avoiding risks/Worrying/Apathy
- Achieving/Striving/Pressuring
- Being passive and pessimistic
- Denial/Numbing/Shutting down

They are **experienced** or seen in the body as:

Holding, containing, rigidity of the body, breath constriction, tension, pain, restrained impulses, body armouring and muscle constriction.

They **relate** to the body by:

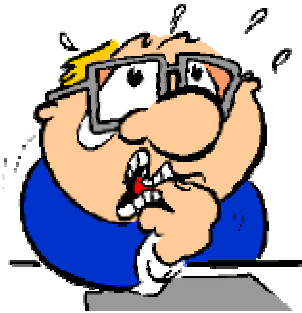
manipulating (including weight gain or loss), criticizing, neglecting, distorting perceptions, numbing and punishing.

Often a manager part will claim to be you (they like to run the show).

If you know someone who seems really tight and restricted in their way of being then chances are they are manager-led.



## Common Fears of Managers:



- That the exiles will take over and flood the system. There will be no return from the dreaded ‘black hole’. Often this is based on remembering a time when the exile was completely blended and the system was stuck in complete shame or fear. Manager parts say “Never again!” and work hard to prevent that from happening.
- That getting to know exiles and exploring deeper will ‘trigger’ dangerous firefighter backlash.
- That you will be overwhelmed by the exiles or be repulsed or contaminated by them.
- That ‘secrets’ the system cannot handle, will become exposed.
- They cannot see the benefit of going deeper as it invites more pain. They may think that they are too damaged to ever get better.
- Doing internal work will result in unwelcome and possibly dangerous changes in external relations.

## Firefighters:



These are the **reactive** protectors – they are heroic, impulsive, and often seen as destructive and narcissistic by manager parts. The goal of the firefighter is keep exiles away from you – to distract from or get rid of their feelings.

They come into play when the exiles are activated – they distract or dissociate to prevent overwhelm or flooding of the inner system.

Managers want you to look good and be approved of, FFs only care about distracting from the pain of the exile so manager parts are often in opposition to FFS – disapproving and judging. You can often hear the two voices playing out in your head:

- “You were too wild at that party last night. “
- “But I was having fun, what’s wrong with that?”
- “People will think you’re an idiot...”

Etc, etc. When these two parts are battling it out in your head the exile remains lost – nobody is paying attention to it.

Firefighters may often experience their role as burdensome and may welcome the transformation to an easier role once they know it is possible.

They are often ***experienced*** in the body as:

- => anxiety
- => panic
- => hyper-vigilance
- => digestive problems
- => pains
- => illness
- => cravings and impulses.

They ***relate*** to the body by:

attempting to soothe and may use chemical substances, self-mutilation, numbing, eating and sleeping disorders, sexual acting out, and other strategies to ease the distress coming from the exiled part.

### **Working with Firefighters:**

Do not try to ‘manage’ them – you may need to address your own fearful Managers when you’re getting to know your firefighters. It helps to:

- Form a compassionate, appreciative relationship with the FF part to let it know you are genuinely grateful for how it has supported you until now and to negotiate access to the exile so that you can help both to transform less extreme roles.
- Look for those parts polarized with the ff parts – usually Manager parts that are critical of them
- Negotiate respectfully and remember the power of these parts in the system.

## Exiles:

These are young parts that may have experienced trauma and/or neglect and other overwhelming experiences. They often become isolated from the rest of the system for their own protection and for the system's protection.

They hold the memories, sensations and emotions of difficult events and are stuck in the past. When activated Exiles present with extreme feelings and/or beliefs. They can become increasingly desperate in their effort to be cared for and to have their story told.



Once relieved of the burdens that they carry they are usually the most sensitive, vulnerable, playful, innocent, creative and intimacy-loving parts.

Exiles can be **experienced** or seen in the body as feelings of emptiness, lethargy, depression, shame, pain etc.

Exiles may **relate** to the body by numbing, freezing, immobilizing the body; depleting energy and/or overwhelming with emotion and sensation.

**Neo-exiles:** These are parts that are exiled by our relationships and may be seen as threatening to our partners.

## Burdens:

These are the beliefs, memories, emotions and sensations that accumulate from past experiences. There is often a core belief or wound being held by a part and it is helpful to discover,

- “What does this part say about itself?” (e.g. “I’m worthless”)
- “What was the message it got?” (e.g. A parent saying “I wish I hadn’t had kids!”)
- “What meaning did it make of that?” (e.g. “I shouldn’t have been born”)

Exiles attempt to tell their story through words, images, behaviours, sensations, movement, dreams, physical symptoms or illness. In the example above you might notice that each time you don’t succeed (failing a job interview, breaking up a relationship) this burdened part will try and get your attention (“I guess I didn’t deserve that job, him/her” etc). Once the story is witnessed and the full weight of the distress recognised, the burdens can be released.

## IFS Process

**Accessing Parts** There are various ways to access your parts:

- Situational – re-experience an upsetting situation. You can focus on what happened to connect with the part(s) that got activated.
- Emotional – access feelings that are already present.
- Somatic – locate feeling in the body.
- Visual/Sensory – describe what feeling looks like – colour, shape, size, density, image?
- Verbal – access the feeling via message it carries.

**You may ask yourself:**

“Is there a part of me that I’d like to get to know better?”

“What part is here right now?”

“What do I notice in or around my body?” “How do I sense or experience it?”

“Does it feel alright to focus on it right now or are there concerns about doing that?”

## Checking for Self Leadership

Once you have located a part check the following:

“How do I feel towards this part? Do I feel open to it?”

“How do I experience the quality of the connection with this part?”

“Is there a heart connection there or is something else going on?”

“How do I feel as I look at the part?”



## Being Present:

How close are you to the part?

How close can you get to the part? Close enough to sense what it is feeling, but not so close that it overwhelms you?

Is it possible to stay very present with this part – no pushing – no rushing – no agenda?



## Unblending (if necessary):

Blending happens when a part takes you over, often saying it feels like you. Remember: if the experience of yourself is not that you feel easy, open and relaxed then chances are a part is blending with you (anxious/depressed/annoyed/unhappy etc).



Unblending and getting access to Self is the heart of the work, and it is often difficult to do. Be patient and know that it will become easier.

One approach is to remember a time in your life when you felt calm, or a sense of inner peace; felt full of love or compassion for someone. You can begin to separate parts from Self by asking various questions.

- “Would you separate from me, so that I can look at you and get to know you?” (*If this is the part that you are trying to get to know*)
- “Would you consider stepping back or out of my body into a witnessing role?” (*If this is **not** the part you are trying to get to know*)
- “What are you concerned might happen if you did step back?”

Keep working with your parts and remember that the protectors are serving you. As you appreciate them for their work and reassure them about their concerns they will begin to trust you.

## Creating Trusting Relationships

When you are in Self Leadership, you may experience compassion towards the parts that are hurting in some way. If there seems to be sufficient ‘Self’ energy (such as calmness and curiosity) let the part know:

- That you are aware of it
- Who you are (and how old you are) so it doesn’t confuse you with another part
- That you would you like to send it your acceptance/appreciation/compassion/love

Check to see if there are parts in the way of having your heart be open to the part, and if so see what their concerns are about you opening to it. Creating trusting relationships in the internal system is important.

Sometimes a part may be mad at you for not having been around or feel like it doesn't and can't trust you. Often this will activate other parts that want to respond. If so just let them know you've got it covered. A part has every right to not trust or be mad at you. Can you be curious about that?

### **Identifying the Role of the Part:**

Assess the role/function/purpose of the part you are getting to know by asking:

- “What is your job? What do you do for me?”
- “Tell me what you want me to know about you”
- “Do you like what you are doing and how you do it?”
- “Can you tell me about when you started doing this?”
- “What are you afraid would happen if you did not do this job?”
- “If you did not do this job, is there something else you would like to do?”

### **Addressing Concerns/Fears:**

Identify and validate what the part is afraid of and offer reassurance that all concerns will be addressed before proceeding further.

“What is the part afraid would happen if ....?” (You kept getting to know an exiled part)

### **Offering Realistic Hope:**

“What if we could do this without your worst fears happening?”

“How would it be for this part if you were able to ....?” (Get to know the other part without the concern being realised?)

### Getting Permission to Work with an Exile:

Your manager and firefighter protectors have been around for a long time helping protect you and/or the exiled part. It is respectful to get permission from them to get to know the distressed part (if it is an exile) by asking:

- “Is it alright with you (*manager/firefighter part*) if I get to know this part?”
- “If I could ensure that I will not get stuck in their pain would you be interested in allowing access to the parts that are feeling (sad, scared, lost etc)”
- “Would it be okay for to witness while I work with this part?”
- “If it looks like it may be too much would you be willing to come in and shut down the communication?”
- “If I were to be able to help these parts to feel better would you still have to do what you do?” (Sometimes protectors are *driven* to do what they do (overwork/rage) by the presence of the exile. Once the exile is unburdened they can *choose* to do what they have always done; but need not be driven to do it. This is often very appealing to protectors.
- “What would you like to do instead if you could?”



### **Unburdening of the Exiles:**

- Check that you feel yourself close to the part without blending/flooding. Sometimes exiled parts are so relieved that you are there that they may flood the system with what they are holding. You can ask them not to do that as it will only serve to activate your protectors which means you cannot stay with them. Let them know that you get how big the feelings are.
- As you pay attention to the Exile's story, memories, feelings and/or sensations and it shows you where it is stuck in the past you can identify and validate its beliefs. If a part wants to minimise, discount, soothe or argue with an exile's beliefs ask it not to do that. It is important to fully witness what the exile is holding without moving to change it.
- If it feels right you can enter the past scene and do what the part tells you it needs to be done. The Exile may need to be removed from an unsafe place and be retrieved into the present time.
- Unburdening ritual: Once the Exile has told you everything about what it is holding you can invite it to bundle all those worries, concerns, feelings, beliefs etc and to send them away permanently to light/air/fire/earth/water or anything else.
- Invite the part to breathe in whatever qualities will help it to move forward now.
- If the part is no longer stuck in the scene in the past ask it where it would like to settle now. Parts may want to be with other parts, live in your heart or mind, grow up, stay the age they are but in a better place like a park or playground... be open to what the part is seeking and give it your blessing.
- Check with other parts that may react to the unburdening by inviting any and all parts connected to the Exile to notice this shift. Invite comments or concerns and address the concerns (such as, "What do I do now that I'm not protecting this part anymore?")
- Thank all the parts that trusted, stepped aside, transformed.

In a sense the work here may be regarded as information transfer. The exiles hold distressing information in the form of feelings and beliefs that they have taken on. Once they have let you know everything that has been hard for them they can release it and return to their preferred place. It is not dissimilar to a child telling a trusted adult about something that worries them, and then once reassured dancing off to play with their friends.

Had there been a trusted adult around to reassure the young child at the time it was upset then it would not have become stuck in the past as an exiled part. Yet now it can be helped.

## **Polarizations**

A polarization occurs when two parts or clusters of parts seemingly operate at cross-purposes develop an on-going, escalating power struggle while attempting to control a behaviour, outcome or decision.



This escalated inner conflict is typically between parts that are protecting the system with vastly different approaches. Since virtually all manager activities are considered socially acceptable and oftentimes even socially desirable behaviours, even the external environment of the family, work and the culture supports and encourages these behaviours, as in, “If I work hard, I will get ahead” or “If I am nice to people, they will like me.”

This is in contrast to many of the firefighter activities, which are often impulsive and risk-taking. These behaviours cause concerned managers to want to seek control as they judge the firefighter activity as wrong and often dangerous. As each side battles to determine which parts can best protect the person’s functioning and best maintain inner stability there is a near constant tension within the system.

This power struggle can escalate into a cycle of addiction that includes compulsive, repetitive firefighter behaviours with their characteristic chaotic or impulsive acting out and managers that are extremely judgmental, fuelling intense inner self-criticism or self-loathing. Generally in an addiction cycle, the same protective parts interact over and over again, often without ever acknowledging the existence of the sensitive, fragile emotions that are underlying and fuelling these warring parts; those parts are exiled.

### **How to work with Polarized Parts:**

- Find the different parts in your body
- Focus on the parts one at a time, letting them know they will both be heard.
- Reassure the parts that you are not going to collude with one part over another.
- Explore the concerns of the parts.
- Have parts share their concerns with each other.
- Support a Self-led resolution.

The unburdening of the exiles protected by both factions may be necessary for genuine healing and permanent internal change.

## Techniques for getting to know your Parts

There are various ways to get to know your parts.

**Concretise** If they are willing to unblend a little from you then you can choose an object to represent them. Say for example a young girl part would like your attention, you could select a doll, a rock, a piece of wood, whatever she would like and place it (her) in your home where you could acknowledge her each day

**Journal** Another technique is to journal from part to part or part to Self. Divide the page in 2 and start the dialogue on the left hand side, then continue from another part on the right: This is an example of a firefighter/manager dialogue. This conversation has probably occurred many times in the system and by putting it outside and perhaps revisiting it the next day it can become clear how there is an exiled part connected to these protectors (I would assume a young part scared of its father's anger).

My Dad is driving me crazy! I'm going to have to tell him to back off.	Come on be reasonable, that's just how he is.
Well maybe I'm finally tired of you excusing him – what's so wrong about standing up to him?	If you do that he might get mad at us.
So What? I can stand up for myself, I'm an adult	

**Email** You can set up an account for your parts. For example if someone is driving you crazy and you're mad at them (your firefighter is triggered) then you can fire off and angry email to your own designated account. Later when the firefighter energy has cooled you can open it, witness the firefighter and perhaps enquire about the exile to which it is connected.

**Video** If you have a webcam you can make short videos for yourself speaking from a blended part. You can then review them later and learn about what that part is holding.



**3-D Parts** This tool is called the Youniverse and is available from David Cantor at [www.davidcantor.net/](http://www.davidcantor.net/) You can move parts around the Self as you explore your system. You may also use a sandtray or drawing/painting to become more clear about your system.

**Meditation** Some meditation techniques regard thoughts and feelings as distractions to be excluded from the focus of the meditation. Using meditation to connect with parts differs from these techniques. The point here is to bring the attention to the parts.

One method is to sit quietly and ask your parts to separate out a bit. If they have a concern about this then just bring your attention to what their concern may be. If they separate out you feel expansiveness in your system. When it feels right ask whatever parts would like some attention to let you know about themselves. Or simply sit and a part will present itself to you.

The CD - "Meditations for Self" by Richard C. Schwartz is available from the Centre for Self-Leadership (web address below)

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## **A Last Word**

I hope this handout is helpful to you.

For more information about IFS please visit

- Me (Derek Scott) at [www.yourtherapist.org](http://www.yourtherapist.org)
- The Centre for Self-Leadership at [www.selfleadership.org](http://www.selfleadership.org)

And to have a place to talk about your work with your own system check out the Facebook Page: IFS Me and My Parts at

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/IFS-Me-and-My-Parts/181763701840869?v=wall>

