



# Internal Family Systems Therapy

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Applying family systems concepts to the intrapsychic realm, the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model proposes that individuals' subpersonalities interact and change in many of the same ways as do families and other human groups. Seasoned practitioner Richard C. Schwartz illuminates how parts of a person can form paralyzing inner alliances resembling the destructive coalitions found in dysfunctional families, and provides straightforward guidelines for incorporating the IFS model into treatment. A valuable text and clinical resource, the book demonstrates in step-by-step detail how therapists can help individuals, couples, and families tap core resources, bring balance and harmony to their subpersonalities, and feel more integrated, confident, and alive.

## **Internal Family Systems Therapy Details**

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# From Reader Review Internal Family Systems Therapy for online ebook

## Vanessa says

I love parts work big-time. I just wished it didn't focus so heavily on eating disorders. However, it is well worth a read for its richness, it's depth and it's clear explanation of the way in which the multiplicity of self can be honored in therapy and attended to in the service of healing.

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## Rachel says

An interesting but dry read.

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## Johna Van says

This is an interesting form of therapy that breaks apart our psyche into separate parts that are separate from the real us, and how we deal with these parts. By actually speaking to these parts, we can remove conflict and internal turmoil that causes suffering. Very enlightening.

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## Jeanine Marie Swenson says

This psychotherapeutic model really resonates with me and all of my parts.

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## Keith Wilson says

You are divided. You must have noticed this when you're trying to decide whether to have that chocolate cake, or stick to your diet; when you rise, groaning from your bed, despite how comfortable that pillow looks; when you want to tell your boss to shove it, but instead say, Yes Sir. It's like, up there in your mind, you have a boardroom with an array of directors all around the table. Your mother's voice is heard sometimes. Also your father, your big brother, who called you a spoiled brat, and your little sister, who told everyone you were mean. There's that coach who said you'd never 'mount to nothin' and that teacher who believed in you. There's the you that your wife knows, another you that goes to church, and still another that's not afraid to sing Karaoke when you've had enough beers. All your feelings are represented on the Board. There's a miniature version of your spouse, a trusted friend, and a wise counselor sitting there. You can consult with them, even if the real person is not around. Your Board of Directors is always meeting, always talking, and always making affiliations with each other; vying for dominance at the table and secretly in cloakrooms, backstage.

The relationships between these characters follow the same rules and fall into the same patterns as

relationships between actual people. You have some who dominate others. Some who are immature, angry, or caring. Some get really excited and over-react. Polarization is found here, just as in the US Congress; so are triangles, the love variety and otherwise. You have the same splendid complexity within as without. This gives you the same advantages that any group of people have (two heads are better than one), as well as disadvantages (sometimes all you do is go to meetings and never get anything done).

Many psychological theories have recognized this multiplicity, but they all have divided it up differently. Freud had his Id, Ego, and Superego. An updated version of Freud, Transactional Analysis, has Child, Adult, and Parent. There's the Inner Child of John Bradshaw. Jung had a rich cast of characters. But no theory has done so much with the phenomena of multiplicity as that of Richard Schwartz's, Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS).

Schwartz's special contribution has been the recognition of three classes of inner characters and the relationship between them. First there are the disavowed parts called the Exiles. These are the memories you would rather not think about and the behavior you swore you would never do again. These are the feelings that threaten to take you over. These are the characters that you have wrapped in duct tape, hidden in the attic. Well, they're getting pissed, and, whenever they get the chance, they bust out of their cells and raise hell.

The second class of inner characters is devoted to seeing to it that the Exiles never return. These are the Managers: the parts that, well, manage your life so the horrible things don't happen. For instance, if you were obese as a child and got picked on a lot for it, then the part of you that gets you to the gym is a manager; so is the part that calls you a fat pig when you have a chocolate sundae.

Then there are the Firemen. This is the class of inner characters who responds to emergencies. What emergency? The Exiles escaping. Like firemen in the real world, who have license to bust down your door with an axe, go to the bed of a sleeping child, carry her out, and soak your living room couch with water, these Firemen go to extremes to keep the Exiles under wraps. In the case of the formerly obese child, every now and then she goes to a bar and sleeps with any man who will sleep with her. She's looking for affirmation, emergency affirmation. That's one of her Firemen doing that, so that the Exile, the shame-filled obese child, is kept under control.

You can imagine that when these three classes of characters gets going, the person feels very divided. The morning after the formerly obese woman goes to the bar, there are a whole slew of managers getting into the act, reprimanding her for being such a slut. This threatens to let loose some other Exiles and then, more Firemen to keep them wrapped up and more managers to repair the damage made by the Firemen.

Isn't there a better way?

Yes, says Schwartz, there is a better way; his Internal Family Systems Therapy is all about finding it.

In Internal Family Systems Therapy, there is one character who is always hidden, but is crucial to the success of the whole. Schwartz confusingly calls this character the Self. Now, many would call the whole system the self, but, to Schwartz, the Self is a special entity.

...everyone has at the core, at the seat of consciousness, a Self that is different from the parts. It is the place from which a person observes, experiences, and interacts with the parts and with other people. It contains the compassion, perspective, confidence, and vision required to lead

both internal and external life harmoniously and sensitively. It is not just a passive observing state, but can be an actor in both inner and outer dramas...I cannot see my Self because it is the me that is doing the seeing, and in that sense it is invisible to me. For these reasons, people are likely to be identified with their parts and unaware of their Selves...Once clients become aware that their Selves rather than their parts are at their core, and they experience their differentiated Selves, they feel better about life. One major goal of the model, then, is to help each client differentiate the Self as quickly as possible so that it can regain its leadership status. (Schwartz, Richard C. (2013-10-14). *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (The Guilford Family Therapy Series) (p. 40). Guilford Publications. Kindle Edition.)

He compares the whole system to an orchestra and the Self is the conductor. You don't directly hear the conductor. He plays no instrument but his baton, but his role is crucial in bringing all the parts together in harmony. When the parts are in disharmony, they are paying no attention to the conductor. Maybe they don't know he exists. Maybe awful things have happened that the Self was powerless to stop. Maybe they, consequently, don't trust its leadership.

A therapist, in Internal Family Systems Therapy, spends a lot of time helping the client take inventory of the parts and identifying them as Exiles, Managers, or Firemen. Special care is accorded to honoring all, especially the Firemen, for their contributions. Managers are respectfully asked to step aside so that the Exiles can be addressed directly. The IFS therapist is always negotiating with the parts on behalf of the Self, so that the Self can be put in charge.

There is a fair amount of resistance to Internal Family Systems Therapy. Clients almost always think that being divided is less desirable than being whole. They worry that, if the therapist recognizes their parts, the parts will take over. There is a fear of Multiple Personality Disorder and the fractured state of Schizophrenia. Schwartz takes great pains to reassure that is it normal, even desirable, to have multiple parts, as long as they are under the direction of the Self. Multiple Personality Disorder is disunion taken to an extreme, he says, but we all have multiple personalities.

When I started to read Internal Family Systems Therapy, I thought I would like it. My Master's Thesis started off to be about Multiple Personality Disorder, so, I was familiar with multiplicity. I've been comfortable leading clients on role plays with ambivalent parts of themselves and with introjected parents. I know how I am divided. However, the more I read Internal Family Systems Therapy, the more uneasy I got. I attended a workshop on it. Still, something wasn't right. I watched a number of YouTube videos showing the techniques in action. Something was wrong and I couldn't put my finger on it. As Schwartz would say, I had parts that were drawn towards it and other parts that were skeptical.

It took me a while to identify the problem, but now I think I understand and am ready to share. I think Schwartz and his followers have lost touch with the obvious.

Multiplicity isn't real. It is normal. It is desirable to certain point. But it ain't real.

Yes, that's right. I didn't think I would ever say this, but I don't think people really are multiple. It just looks like they are.

Reality is important to me, even though I am aware of how hard it is to grasp. Perhaps, it is because it's so hard to define, that I don't want to let it go when I find it.

Also, I have an image of being a practical, no-nonsense, kind of therapist to uphold. A certain kind of underserved clientele flock to me because they think the mental health world is glutted with flakiness. Can I really be telling them that they are inhabited by legions and get them talking to themselves? I, personally, don't have a problem talking to myself, but I would feel partly responsible if a client left my office saying, "I knew it. They're all the same. These shrinks are nuttier than their patients," and went back to drinking and beating his wife.

Still, I understand the value of Internal Family System's Therapy and want to find a way to make it easy for my clients to swallow and digestible for myself. This is what I came up with.

You know how a meteorologist will program a simulated climate into a computer? She will tweak this and that just to see what the effect might be. She'll punch a few numbers in that indicate increased carbon emissions, run the program, and see the result on the Arctic ice cap. That's what's going on inside you. You have created, based on what you know, a simulated world in your mind. All the people you know are in it; along with all the possible versions of you. Then you run different scenarios.

For example, you're starting a career in public speaking. You learn pacing, diction, and what to do with your hands. You practice in front of a mirror when no one is around, simulating a performance. Then the day comes and, while you are waiting to go on stage, you experience stage fright. Stage fright is essentially a simulated version of what you think will happen if you get tongue-tied. You imagine going on stage and not being able to speak, everyone laughing, and you running off in humiliation. That is a simulation of both you and the audience.

The practiced version comes along to counter the stage fright. It says, you'll be fine, you practiced this. It also says, the audience won't mind if you trip up on a couple words. The practiced version is a Schwartzian Manager. You decide that, if you back out now, you will be humiliated anyway, so you decide to throw the tongue-tied simulation away. It's important to realize that the stage fright was there all along, only it wasn't always problem; it's what motivated you to prepare. When you're about to go on stage, it's not needed anymore. It already did its work by motivating you to be better prepared. It becomes an Exile.

Time goes on and your career as a public speaker grows. You speak in larger venues. You still have the simulation of being tongue-tied. It continues to motivate you to be better prepared. You write better speeches. You learn to use a teleprompter. Then you get your big break. You're scheduled to appear in TedTalks. The moment comes and the simulation of being tongue tied is still there; only again, it's not useful anymore. You can hardly be better prepared. You develop a new simulation, based on how, in the past, when you've had a few drinks, you felt calm. Therefore, on your way to your speaking engagement, you stop at a bar and throw back a couple of shots of whiskey. That simulation was your Fireman, in action. Only, I guess I would call it a security guard.

For a simulation to be effective it needs to fulfill certain criteria. It has to be an accurate representation of how you could be in the real world and an accurate simulation of the real world. It has to know whether you can pronounce certain words, for instance, and what the effect of alcohol would be. A simulation also has to seem to have a will of its own so you can accurately project how it will behave. It does you no good, when you run a simulation of the behavior of an audience, to tell it how you want it to behave. You need it to behave as an audience would behave, as if it had a will of its own. Similarly, both the practiced version and the tongue-tied version also seem to have wills of their own. That's why it can be hard to talk yourself out of stage fright. Simulations do not go away quietly.

Schwartz notes that the behavior of parts of the inner world matches the behavior of an individual within

families. You have the same polarization and the same triangularization inside as out. Is it any wonder, if the inner world is meant to be a simulation of the actual one?

Thus, the better a simulation is, the more easily it can also be confused with your actual self and the actual world. If you do confuse them, then that's because you're a good author and have developed rich, well-drawn characters that seem real.

You can hear this confusion when you talk. You say, as you're about to go on stage, "I'm afraid."

No, you are not afraid. You're running a simulation that's afraid. You created a character, meant to resemble you. If you confuse this character with you, then you did a good job creating it; but it's not you. You are the creator. You are the person directing, watching, and listening to the show.

So, now that I have figured out why I felt so uncomfortable with Internal Family Systems Therapy, where does that leave me? Can I no longer work with clients who believe they are multiple? Do I have to stop conversing with the parts of myself? Can I no longer lead clients in role plays with their parts and introjected parents?

Not at all. In fact, my insight makes me feel a whole lot better about using Internal Family Systems Therapy, or, at least a version of it. You see, Schwartz and I are in agreement with the character of the most important component of the system: the Self. The Self is the meteorologist running the simulated climate program. The Self is the creator of all the simulations. A creator who has made his creation in his own image. An almighty god, who can cast his creations into hell, where they cry and gnash their teeth; or extend grace, mercy, and redemption to a broken inner world that matches the broken actual world.

I believe it is necessary, though, to say that these parts are not real. This gives the Self authority over the parts. If the Self knows it has authority, then it has strength. It knows it can afford to be flexible, compassionate, and curious. It can take leadership over its creation and not confuse the real world with the notions of the mind.

*Keith R Wilson writes about mental health in his blog, Madness 101.*

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## **Karson says**

About how we internalize and deal with pain. Really insightful.

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## **Lora Rivera says**

This model seems to make a lot of intuitive sense. Well-laid out. I would've liked the chance to look at a single-parent situation. I also expected a less simplified analysis of societal/cultural burdens...

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## **Anne Kadet says**

A whole new and super helpful way of looking at everything.

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**Julie says**

For the more advanced seeker. This book provides an applicable theory to how emotions work and why we make the decisions we make. It has changed my whole world view and is a tool that has allowed me to learn how to have more grace toward myself and as a result, I have more grace to give to others.

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**Sarah says**

Very interesting theory

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**Max says**

really dry! but good applications.

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