

## What is the “Internal Family System”?

In the words of Richard C. Schwartz, Ph.D., founder of IFS:

Once I ... began to really listen to what my clients were saying, what I heard repeatedly was descriptions of what they often called “their parts” -- the conflicted subpersonalities that resided within them.

...I learned that, across people, parts take on common roles and common inner relationships. I also learned that these inner roles and relationships were not static and could be changed if one intervened carefully and respectfully. I began conceiving of the mind as an inner family...

...a person [contains] ... relatively discrete minds each of which has valuable qualities and each of which is designed to, and wants to, play a valuable role... These parts are forced out of their valuable roles, however, by life experiences that can reorganize the system in unhealthy ways.

What are the circumstances that force these parts into extreme and sometimes destructive roles? Trauma is one factor and the effects of childhood sexual abuse on internal families has been discussed at length (Goulding and Schwartz, 1995). But more often, it is a person's family values and interaction patterns that create internal polarizations which escalate over time and are played out in other relationships.

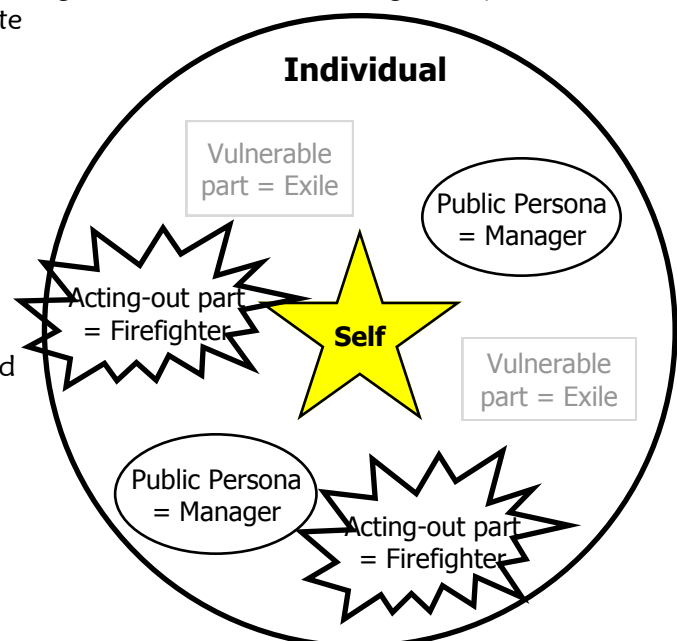
Managers: Most clients had parts that tried to keep them functional and safe -- tried to maintain control of their inner and outer environments by, for example, keeping them from getting too close, or dependent on others, criticizing their appearance or performance to make them look or act better, and focusing on taking care of others' rather than on their own needs. These parts seemed to be in protective, managerial roles and therefore are called the *managers*.

Exiles: Where a person has been hurt, humiliated, frightened or shamed in their past, they will have parts that carry the emotions, memories and sensations from those experiences. Managers often want to keep those feelings out of consciousness and, consequently, try to keep these vulnerable and needy parts locked in inner closets. Those incarcerated parts are known as the *exiles*.

Firefighters: The third and final group of parts clicks into action whenever one of the exiles is upset to the point that it may flood the person with its extreme feelings or makes the person vulnerable to being hurt again. When that is the case, this third group tries to put out the inner flames of feeling as quickly as possible, which earns them the name *firefighters*. They tend to be highly impulsive and drive to find stimulation that will override or dissociate from the exile's feelings. Bingeing on drugs, alcohol, food, sex, or work, are common firefighter activities.

### Self

...in addition to these parts, everyone is at their core a **Self** that contains many crucial leadership qualities like calmness, perspective, confidence, compassion, courage, creativity, connectedness and acceptance. ... everyone has this healthy and healing Self despite the fact that many people have very little access to it initially. When working with an individual, the goal of IFS is to differentiate this Self from the parts, thereby releasing its resources, and then in the state of Self, to help parts out of their extreme roles.



# Qualities and Strategies of the Parts

## Exiles

Present as:

Hurt  
Scared  
Bored  
Alone  
Weak  
Powerless  
Chaotic  
Disorganized

Original qualities:

Innocent  
Playful  
Joyful  
Spontaneous  
Clever  
Mischievous

## Managers

Present as:

Authoritarian (“Should...”)  
Safe, fearful, careful  
Kind  
Adapting (Passive)  
Aggressive

Underlying belief:

It is dangerous to be yourself;  
you’ll get hurt if you are your-  
self.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## Self

Presents as:

★ calm,  
★ confident,  
★ compassionate,  
★ courageous,  
★ clear,  
★ creative,  
★ connected, curious,  
★ accepting, humorous.

Role:

- ★ • To be differentiated
- ★ from the parts;
- ★ • To use its resources
- ★ as a leader, and
- ★ healer, and
- ★ • To help parts out of
- ★ their extreme roles

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## Firefighters

Present as:

Rage, Aggression  
Ruthless, not caring about  
consequences  
Numbing or distracting  
with...  
Alcohol, Drugs  
Food  
Sex  
Shopping  
Cutting, Self harm  
Reading  
Daydream, Disassociate  
Leave, avoid  
Verbal smokescreen  
Stonewall, Clam up  
Joking  
Arrogance

Goal:

Distract your attention  
from the pain.