# Internal Family Systems℠

PSYCHOEDUCATION · PARTS, SELF AND THE INNER SYSTEM

*An introduction to one therapy model's way of understanding the many sides of ourselves*

How to read this resource. This is an independent educational summary of the Internal Family Systems℠ (IFS℠) model. B&F Clinical Psychology is not affiliated with or endorsed by the IFS Institute, and this is not IFS Institute training or certification material. Terms such as Self, parts, exiles, protectors and burdens are concepts within the IFS model, not established psychological facts.

**Richard C. Schwartz, PhD**
*family therapist, founder of IFS*

Schwartz developed IFS in the 1980s. Trained in family therapy, he noticed clients describing "parts" of themselves that related to each other much like members of a family, and applied systems thinking to this inner world.

THREE CORE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE IFS MODEL

### A mind of many parts

IFS describes the mind as naturally made up of many parts, not as a sign that something is wrong.

### "No bad parts"

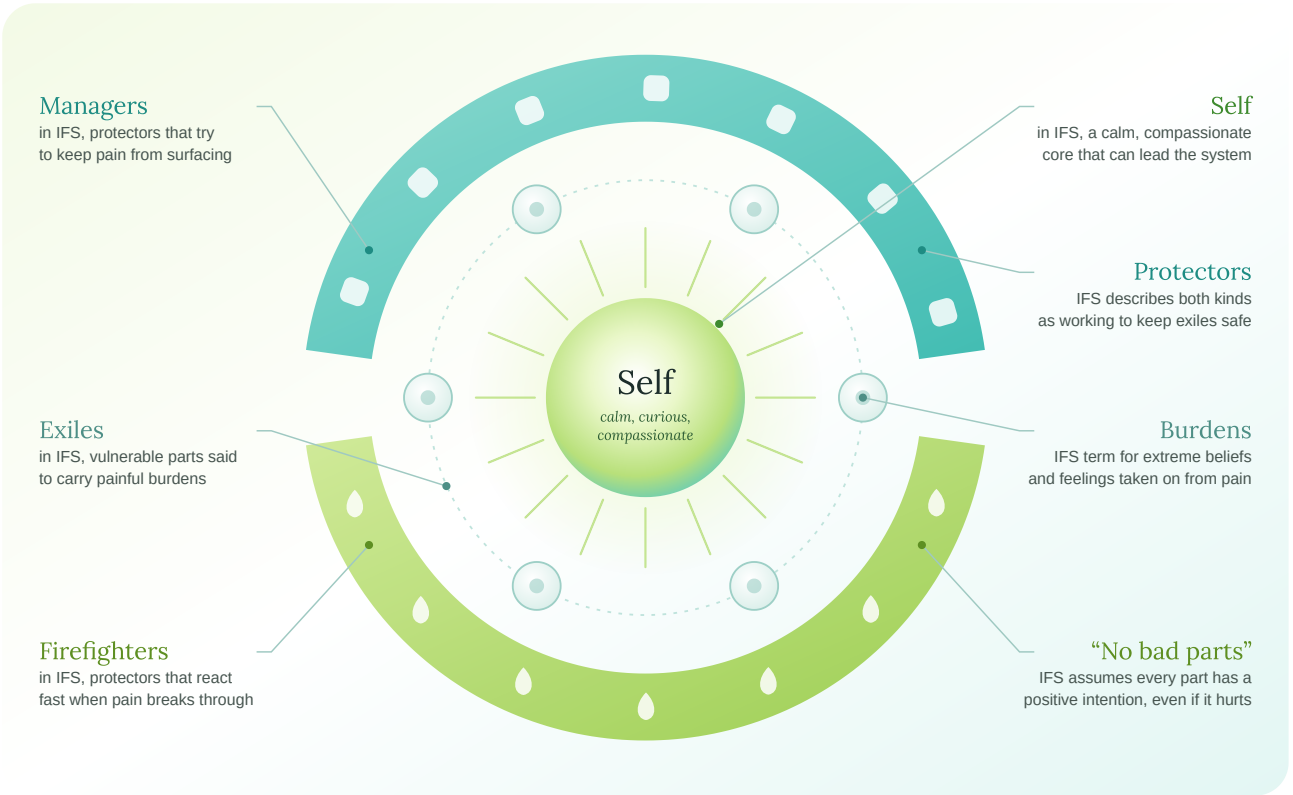
A core IFS assumption is that even troublesome parts are trying to help in some way.

### A core Self

IFS proposes that everyone has a calm, compassionate Self that can lead the parts.

## 01 The inner system

*a simplified map of the IFS model*




## 02 The Self

*how the IFS model describes the core of a person*




### In IFS, Self-led moments are described as having these qualities

Schwartz describes the Self through eight qualities, often called the eight Cs. In the IFS model, the Self is described as never damaged, only sometimes hidden when parts take over.

He also describes five Ps that can show up in Self-led moments:

presence · patience · perspective · persistence · playfulness

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## 03 Meet the parts

*three roles described in IFS*

In IFS, parts are often described as having their own feelings, beliefs, ages and ways of helping. Most fall into two groups: vulnerable parts (exiles) and the protectors who try to keep them safe (managers and firefighters).

### Exiles

vulnerable parts

**THEIR ROLE**

In IFS, often young parts that hold painful memories, emotions or beliefs from difficult experiences. Other parts may keep them hidden to protect us.

**MAY SHOW UP AS**

shame, loneliness, fear, feeling unworthy or not enough

**WHAT IFS SUGGESTS THEY NEED**

to be seen, understood and cared for, and to be freed from what they carry

*What does this part want me to know?*

### Managers

proactive protectors

**THEIR ROLE**

Described in IFS as parts that work ahead of time to keep us safe, in control and away from situations that might stir up exiles' pain.

**MAY SHOW UP AS**

planning, perfectionism, people-pleasing, worrying, self-criticism, staying busy

**WHAT IFS SUGGESTS THEY NEED**

to be appreciated for their hard work, and to trust they can relax a little

*What are you afraid would happen if you stopped?*

### Firefighters

reactive protectors

**THEIR ROLE**

Described in IFS as parts that act quickly when painful feelings break through, trying to put out the emotional fire, whatever the cost.

**MAY SHOW UP AS**

distraction, numbing, bingeing, scrolling, sudden anger, shutting down

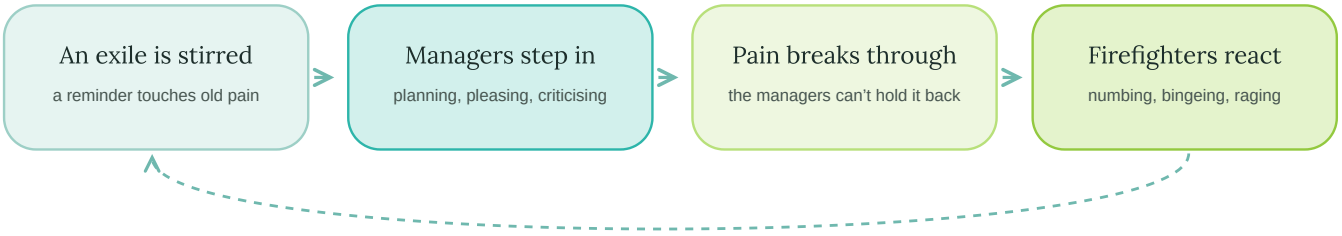
**WHAT IFS SUGGESTS THEY NEED**

relief for the system; underneath, the same goal as managers: protection

*What are you trying to protect me from?*

## 04 How the system protects itself

*a pattern described in the IFS model*




*in the model, relief is brief because the exile's pain is unhealed, so the cycle repeats*

## 05 Blended or unblended

*making a little space*




blended

unblended

In IFS terms, when a part is **blended**, its feelings take over and seem like all of us: *"I am furious."*

When we **unblend**, we can notice the part with some space and curiosity: *"A part of me is furious, and I can be with it."*

IFS suggests asking how you feel toward the part. In the model, an open or curious answer suggests Self is present; feeling irritated or afraid suggests another part has stepped in.

## 06 Burdens

*how the IFS model describes what parts carry*

### Personal burdens

IFS uses this term for painful beliefs or feelings taken on from our own experiences, such as "I'm not lovable".

### Legacy burdens

IFS also describes beliefs and emotions thought to be passed down through families, cultures or communities.

### Burdens aren't the part

The model views parts as separate from what they carry, which is why IFS aims to help release burdens.

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## 07 How IFS therapy often unfolds

*a gradual, permission-based process*

### Getting to know protectors

the IFS "six Fs"; in the model, protectors' permission comes first

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Find | notice a part: a feeling, thought or sensation |
| 2 | Focus | turn your attention toward it |
| 3 | Flesh out | get curious about how it shows up |
| 4 | Feel toward | notice how you feel toward the part |
| 5 | beFriend | get to know its role and intentions |
| 6 | Fears | ask what it worries would happen |

### Healing exiles

as described in the model; only when protectors agree, with a trained therapist

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Witness | the exile shares what it has carried |
| 2 | Retrieve | it is helped out of the past |
| 3 | Unburden | it releases painful beliefs or feelings |
| 4 | Invite | it takes in qualities it needs |
| 5 | Integrate | protectors can take on new roles |

## 08 What the research says

*promising, still developing*

**CURRENT EVIDENCE**

- A small uncontrolled pilot (17 adults) found reductions in PTSD and related symptoms after childhood trauma.
- A 2026 randomised trial of an IFS-based group programme for PTSD (60 adults) found it feasible and acceptable. Symptoms improved in both groups, with no significant difference from an active comparison.
- A proof-of-concept trial in rheumatoid arthritis found improvements in pain, physical function and some mood outcomes, but not sustained change in disease activity.
- Larger trials are needed; IFS has not yet been shown to be more effective than other active treatments.

**GOOD TO KNOW**

- Ideas such as the Self, "no bad parts" and burdens are assumptions of the IFS model, not established psychological facts.
- "Parts" are a way of describing normal inner experience, not separate personalities.
- Working directly with exiles is best done with a trained practitioner.
- IFS is one of many approaches; well-established treatments exist for many conditions.

## 09 Getting to know a part

*a gentle practice with a protector*

### Choose a familiar, everyday part, such as a worrier, a planner or an inner critic

What part am I noticing?

Where do I notice it in my body?

How do I feel toward this part?

What is it trying to do for me?

What is it afraid would happen if it stopped?

What might it need from me?

*If strong, vulnerable feelings come up, thank the part, gently return your attention to the room, and leave deeper work for another time or a trained practitioner.*

### About this resource

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**GO AT YOUR OWN PACE**

Turning toward inner parts can bring up strong feelings. You can pause at any point, notice your surroundings, and come back later. If difficult feelings persist, consider speaking with a qualified professional. If you ever feel unsafe, contact your local emergency services.

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