

Overview

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS™ MODEL

The IFS Model views a person as containing an ecology of relatively discrete minds, each of which has valuable qualities and each of which is designed for, and wants to play a valuable role. (For the evolution of this theory and its relation to other theories of multiplicity, see below.) These minds, or parts, are forced out of their valuable roles, however, by life experiences that reorganize the system in unhealthy ways. A good analogy is an alcoholic family, in which the children are forced into protective and stereotypic roles (the scapegoat, mascot, lost child, and so on) by the extreme dynamics of their family. But these roles do not represent the essence of the children; on the contrary, once released from his or her role by intervention, each child can find interests and talents separate from the demands of the chaotic family. The same process seems to hold true for internal families -- parts are forced into extreme roles by external circumstances, but they gladly transform into moderate, more functional roles once they see that the system can safely operate that way.

What circumstances force these parts into extreme and sometimes destructive roles? Trauma is one factor, but more often it is a person's family of origin values and interactional patterns that create internal polarizations, which escalate over time and are played out in other relationships. Object relations and self psychology have observed these processes. What is novel about IFS is its understanding of all levels of human organization -- intrapsychic, family, and culture -- through the same systemic principles, and its intervention at each level with the same ecological techniques.

Parts: Managers, Firefighters, and Exiles

Most clients have parts that try to keep them functional and safe -- to maintain control of their inner and outer environments. They do this, for example, by keeping them from getting too close or dependent on others, by criticizing their appearance or their performance to make them look or act better, and by taking care of others' needs rather than their own. These parts that are in protective, managerial roles are called managers. When a person has been severely or chronically hurt, humiliated, frightened, or shamed, certain parts carry emotions, memories, and sensations from those experiences. To keep these feelings out of consciousness, managers try to keep vulnerable, needy parts locked in inner closets. These incarcerated parts are known as exiles. Whenever one of the exiles is upset to the point that it floods the person or exposes him or her to being hurt again, the third group of parts rushes to douse the inner flames of feeling, earning them the name firefighters. Highly impulsive, they push for stimulation that will override or dissociate from the exile's feelings. Bingeing on drugs, alcohol, food, sex, or work are common firefighter activities.

The Self

The aspect of the IFS Model that differentiates it most significantly from other models is the belief that, in addition to these parts, everyone is at their core a Self. The Self has leadership and healing qualities -- perspective, confidence, compassion, and acceptance -- crucial to our highest, most harmonious functioning. Even the most severely abused, symptomatic clients have this healthy and healing Self, although many have very little access to it initially. The goal of IFS therapy is to differentiate this Self from the parts, thereby freeing its resources for healing by helping parts out of their extreme roles and guiding them into harmonious collaboration.

Unlike other approaches to psychotherapy, IFS has as its goal leadership by the Self of the client's internal system of parts, and, in families, groups, and organizations, Self-leadership within each member. In contrast to other forms of psychotherapy, the IFS therapist does not have to teach clients how to correct the thoughts and emotions picked up by parts through their experiences. When clients are led by their Selves, they know, through internal communication, how to help each inner personality, what those parts need in order to feel safe, and how they can release their burdens. Led by the qualities of the Self, clients know how to provide what the parts need. The therapist's job is to guide clients to a Self-led state in which they become therapists to their own inner families.

In interpersonal relationships, when the therapist can help family members get their parts to step back and let their Selves communicate, long-standing issues are resolved with a minimum of guidance. Rather than reacting to each other's extreme views and positions, each Self-led person, sensing the hurt behind the protective walls of other's parts, automatically feels empathy, just as individual clients feel for their own parts. It is the Self's compassionate understanding of the parts' pain and shame, as well as the Self's availability to assist the parts again and again, that is healing.

You can learn more about the Internal Family Systems Model and how to work with it in the Level 1 course in Internal Family Systems. Books, articles, and DVDs/CDs about IFS are available at www.selfleadership.org

www.expressyoursoul.com