

# FINDING SELF

How **Internal Family Systems** has



# transformed me and my practice

BY FRANCES FERGUSON, RCC

Several years ago, I travelled to Vancouver to attend the Marriage and Family Therapy Conference. I wasn't a member of AAMFT, and my motivations weren't all that pure. I needed a break, and the idea of a little getaway in Vancouver was appealing. The logical, rationalizing part of me justified the cost of a trip to Vancouver for continuing education credits. Little did I know that my life would be transformed.

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Dr. Richard Schwartz, founder of the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, was the second speaker after lunch, so I wasn't sure if I'd still be awake. However, as he stood and talked about his own parts, parts that felt anxious and worried, self-critical, or inadequate, I felt a resonance, sensing that here was someone who walks the talk. It was refreshing to listen to a psychologist of renown who was so humble, sharing vulnerability and confidence with congruence and presence I hadn't seen before. I asked myself, "Could it really be that there's a way of working with ourselves, and with our clients, that frees these parts from their suffering — effectively and rather effortlessly?" Richard's video demonstrations offered my first glimpse into IFS in action and proved the answer is a resounding, "Yes."

Since that afternoon, I have completed three levels of IFS training, and I have incorporated IFS extensively into my private counselling practice. With the help of an IFS

therapist, I have transformed my own inner critic, parts sensitive to rejection and other childhood issues, into sources of positive, creative, life-affirming energy.

I have watched in amazement as clients, once they are in a state of Self, establish relationships with parts of themselves that had previously been a source of tremendous torment and pain, seeming to know exactly what to say or do that would lead to ways to help the part. My job became mainly to teach clients about the state of Self and help them remain in it, and then get out of the way, so they could be therapists to their own inner world. It took me a while to trust that they — and I — could actually do that.

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model has evolved over the past 30 years into a comprehensive approach that represents a new synthesis of already existing paradigms: systems thinking and multiplicity of mind. As early as 1983, Richard Schwartz was working with eating-disordered clients when he began paying close attention to their language: part of me wants to binge and then another part attacks. He began to conceptualize these subpersonalities and view a person as an "ecology of relatively discrete minds, each of which has valuable qualities and each of which is designed to — and wants to — play a valuable role within." The internal world of the client became like a family. Parts had been forced out of their valuable roles by external circumstances, but once it seemed safe to do so, they gladly transformed into valuable family members.

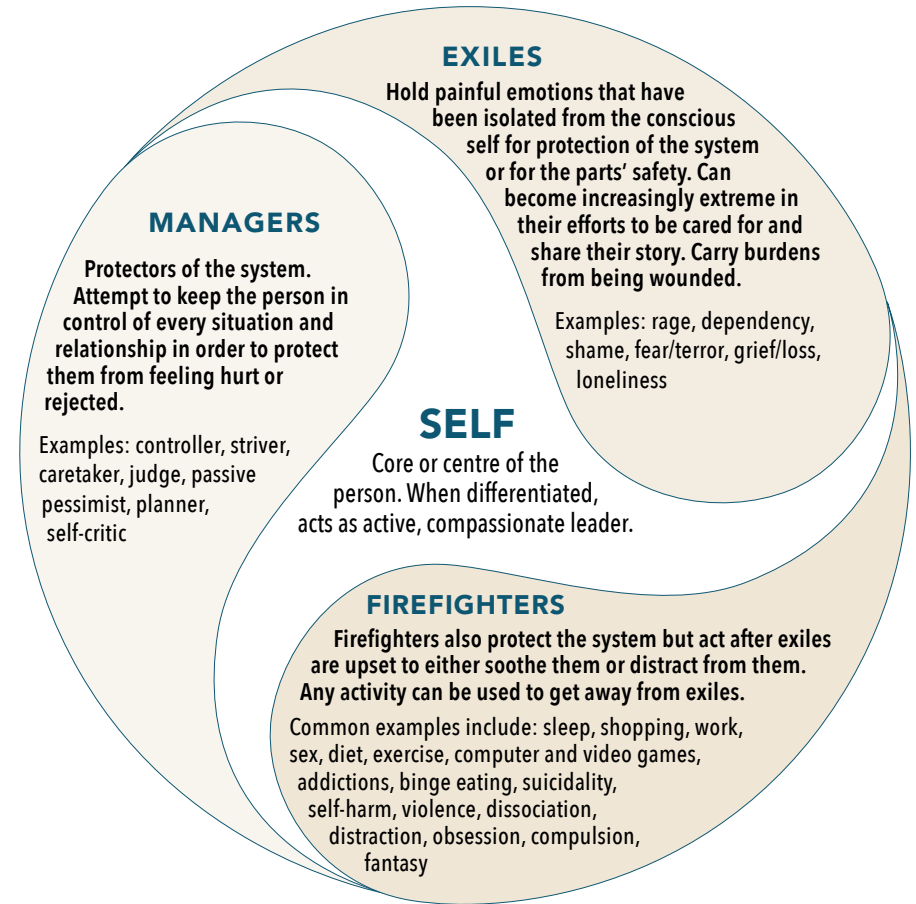
## THE INTERNAL SYSTEM

### MANAGERS, FIREFIGHTERS, AND EXILES

Over time, Richard Schwartz found patterns emerging among the many clients he saw. People had wounded parts, parts that tried to keep them functional and safe by trying to keep control of both the inner and outer worlds, and parts that jumped into action whenever a more vulnerable part appeared. “Manager” was the name given to parts whose roles are to keep a person in control — for example, to prevent a person from being too dependent, to avoid criticism, or to focus on taking care of others’ needs. When a person feels hurt, shamed, frightened, or humiliated, they have parts that carry the emotions, memories, and bodily sensations from those experiences. The pain these parts carry from the past is often perceived to be a threat to the system, so the tendency is to try to avoid or get rid of them, which is why Schwartz termed them “Exiles.” Managers are often proactive at keeping those painful feelings out of conscious awareness to protect the person from ever experiencing that pain again. However, life has a way of triggering circumstances, and when Exiles do get upset, another group of parts called “Firefighters” instantly reacts to try to douse the flames of feeling as quickly as possible. Firefighters are often highly impulsive and will do anything that will override or distract from the Exiles’ feelings, regardless of the consequences. Common firefighting activities include drug and alcohol abuse, as well as behavioural issues connected to work and food.

### SELF

A central aspect of the IFS model is the belief that, in addition to all of these



parts, everyone has a core Self that carries crucial leadership qualities, such as compassion, curiosity, acceptance, confidence, and understanding. Self is not a passive state of mind, but an active presence. Everyone has this core Self, untarnished by any event or circumstance of the person’s life. The foremost goal of IFS is to differentiate this Self from the parts, thereby releasing its resources to assist parts that are suffering. We know when we’re in the presence of someone with Self-energy — we feel safe, the person is authentic, unpretentious, without an agenda, and naturally compassionate. It’s the same on the inside. The parts know when they can feel like “there’s somebody home” and can relax and trust the Self to lead towards healing.

This approach makes IFS a hopeful framework for psychotherapy, and one that is non-pathologizing. Because IFS locates the source of healing within the client, Schwartz says, the therapist is freed to focus on guiding clients’ access to their true Self and supporting clients in harnessing its wisdom: “It provides an alternative understanding of psychic functioning and healing that allows for innovative techniques in relieving clients’ symptoms and suffering.”

### MY STORY

For many years, despite my efforts to quiet them, I heard voices in my head that said, “You’re fat, lazy, stupid” and “Don’t think too much of yourself” and “Who do you think you are? You can’t do that.” I carried parts humiliated and



ashamed by being the last person chosen on the baseball team, and for years, lived in the shadow of fear of rejection or failure. At the same time, I had a deep sense that I had something to offer — I just didn't know what that was. For years, I have struggled with the polarizations of being good enough and being rejected. IFS gave me the tools to finally understand those voices in my head, and appreciate their roles as protectors against further suffering. I learned how much my life was constricted by fear, and underneath the protectors, found and freed many of the isolated and lonely exiles. The sense of freedom is palpable and is reflected in all my relationships and activities. I find myself enjoying my husband, rather than being critical. I am able to speak "for" parts that let me know when something is out of whack, and I listen deeply when parts let me know they need some gentle attention. People who weren't real friends have dropped off, and true friendships have deepened as I strive to be more authentic and congruent in all aspects of my life.

Not surprisingly, as I gradually become more Self-led, it's easier for me to light the path for clients to access their own Self-energy as well. In Self, there is space where all parts are welcomed, and I find great joy in teaching people how to communicate with their parts. Some examples illustrate the transformation. A client who had suffered a lengthy history of sexual abuse and dysfunction in her family of origin learned to use IFS to provide comfort and resource parts. A client who had a baby out of wedlock was able to transform the shame she'd carried for over 50 years into positive energy and passion. A client suffering from longstanding depression, who had tried many other approaches, found relief as he attended to a young part that had experienced early trauma.

Although IFS is not yet well known in Canada, interest in it is growing around the

world, with over 4,000 therapists trained in 10 different countries, since Richard Schwartz developed the Center for Self Leadership in 2000. IFS has been recognized as an evidence-based practice by the National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices. As a clinical treatment, IFS has

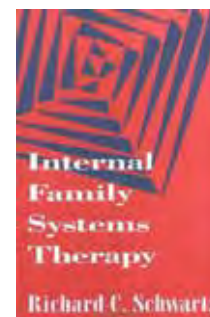
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been rated effective for improving general functioning and well-being. It has been rated promising for improving phobia, panic, and generalized anxiety disorders and symptoms; physical health conditions and symptoms; personal resilience/self-concept; and depression and depressive symptoms. Further clinical research is ongoing to examine the efficacy of IFS and the vast potential of the model.

Like many of my colleagues, I was trained in more traditional approaches to psychotherapy. They worked, more or less, but I always felt something was missing in my approach. After 15 years in practice, I feel like I've "come home" to a model that honours both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of being human. I've been using IFS for about five years now, and therapy has never been so fulfilling, rewarding, or as easy. Instead of being exhausted by the end of the day, concerned about whether or not I was any help to a client, or what on earth I might do to help them, I feel inspired and energized. It's the most transformative approach I've found in all my years in practice. ■

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*Frances Ferguson, M.Ed., is an RCC in private practice in Campbell River, B.C. She practised in Winnipeg before moving to the West Coast in 2003 and has also lived and practised in Powell River and Courtenay. Fran uses IFS extensively in her practice with individuals and couples. For more information, go to [www.talktofran.com](http://www.talktofran.com).*



**Richard Schwartz, PhD,** has written five books and authored over 50 articles on Internal Family Systems and was the co-author of *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*, the most widely used family text in the United States. He has appeared as a featured speaker for many national and international psychotherapy organizations. Information on training opportunities, publications, and video resources are available on his website at [www.selfleadership.org](http://www.selfleadership.org).