

Exploring Your Inner Parts: An Internal Family Systems Worksheet

Objective

To increase your understanding of your inner system “parts” to reduce the effects of past trauma.

What to Know

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a therapeutic approach developed by Richard C. Schwartz, Ph.D. It is based on the idea that the mind is composed of multiple “parts” or distinct aspects of self, each with its own perspectives, intentions, and beliefs. These parts are not viewed as literal entities, but rather as metaphors to describe different patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that people experience. Each part developed in response to past experiences, trauma, or as protective mechanisms.

The parts can be organized and interact in various ways, sometimes causing internal conflicts and distress. The goal of IFS therapy is to help individuals establish a harmonious relationship among their parts, promoting self-leadership and healing. IFS Therapy has four goals, to:

- liberate parts from the roles they have been forced into, freeing them to be who they were designed to be.
- restore faith in the self and in self-leadership.
- re-harmonize the inner system.
- encourage clients to become self-led in their interactions.

Here are the primary parts as described by IFS.

1. One of the most known terms is “**inner child**”. This refers to the younger version of yourself that experienced life from birth to around age 21. There may be one specific inner child part, or sometimes there are different “child parts” (baby, toddler, school-age, teenager, and evolving adult). These parts all hold happy moments as well as challenging, scary, or traumatic unresolved memories. When you are ready to process and resolve them as an adult, emotions and/or memories are triggered.

2. **Exiles** are parts that carry emotional pain, traumatic memories, or vulnerable emotions. These are typically younger parts that experienced pain or unmet needs. Exiles are typically pushed away from awareness and hidden to protect you from re-experiencing the pain associated with them.

3. **Managers** are protective parts that aim to prevent exiled parts from being triggered and to maintain a sense of control and safety. They often manifest as perfectionism, self-criticism, rigidity, or overachievement. Managers develop as coping strategies in response to difficult life circumstances.

4. **Firefighters** are reactive parts that emerge when exiles are activated and overwhelmed by intense emotions or memories. They act as emergency responders, attempting to distract or numb you through impulsive behaviors such as substance abuse, binge eating, self-harm, or other compulsive behaviors. Firefighters provide temporary relief but can contribute to long-term negative consequences.

5. The core aspect called the "**Self**" is your true essence, and it is characterized by qualities such as curiosity, compassion, wisdom, and calmness. It serves as a center of stability and can provide guidance, healing, and leadership within your internal system. In IFS, the goal is to establish a harmonious relationship among the parts, where the Self takes charge and interacts with all parts from a place of understanding and compassion.

The Self's qualities are known as the "8 Cs," key qualities that are essential for effective parts work. These qualities provide a framework for understanding and engaging with your different parts.

- **Curiosity** involves cultivating a non-judgmental and open-minded attitude toward your internal experience. It is about approaching your parts with genuine interest and a willingness to explore and understand them. Curiosity helps create a safe space for parts to reveal themselves and express concerns or needs.
- **Compassion** is an attitude of warmth, kindness, and acceptance toward yourself and your parts. It involves treating all parts with empathy and understanding, regardless of their roles or behaviors. Compassion helps establish a trusting relationship with your parts, fostering a sense of safety and support.
- **Calmness** refers to an inner state of peace and centeredness while engaging with your parts. It involves grounding yourself and maintaining a sense of stability and presence during parts work. Calmness allows you to approach your parts from a place of emotional regulation rather than being overwhelmed by their intensity.
- **Courage** involves the willingness to face and explore challenging or uncomfortable parts. You are brave enough to confront difficult emotions, memories, or beliefs held by different parts. Courage helps you move beyond avoidance or resistance and engage in deeper healing and integration.
- **Clarity** refers to the ability to access a clear and expanded perspective during parts work. It involves seeing the bigger picture, recognizing the interconnections among different parts, and understanding their underlying motivations and intentions. Clarity helps you gain insight into the dynamics and relationships among your parts.
- **Confidence** involves trusting your own inner wisdom and capacity to navigate parts work effectively. You have faith in your ability to connect with and guide your parts toward healing and integration. Confidence allows you to step into the role of leader, providing stability and direction for your parts.
- **Creativity** involves tapping into your imaginative and intuitive capacities when working with your parts. It allows you to explore new possibilities, alternative perspectives, and innovative solutions for healing and resolving conflicts. Creativity encourages flexibility and adaptability.

- **Connection** refers to establishing a deep and authentic connection with your parts, cultivating a sense of trust, mutual respect, and collaboration between them. Connection allows for effective communication and cooperation among parts, fostering integration and harmonious functioning.

The 8 Cs provide a framework for creating a therapeutic and transformative inner dialogue with your parts, facilitating healing, integration, and a greater sense of self-awareness and well-being.

How do you know if there is inner conflict among your parts?

When there is inner conflict, it can feel like there are parts rebelling against each other. As uncomfortable as this may be, it is often the best way to know something requires your attention. You may experience any of the following.

Internalized Aggression. You often feel angry and frequently lash out at yourself. You are severely self-critical and may have thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Sometimes, anger turned inwards is a sign you did not have permission to be angry as a child. It was not safe to express anger because the adults around you could not tolerate the intensity of your emotions.

Shame. Shame distorts your entire identity, making you believe you are damaged, no-good, and unworthy of love and goodness. If you were ignored, neglected, hurt, or shamed as a child, you will carry shame as an adult. Shame expresses itself in the way you interact with others, the kinds of relationships you believe you deserve, how you speak up in the workplace, and how you parent your children and set boundaries.

Regression. Do you ever feel like a child in an adult body, or experience a full-blown tantrum that would be more appropriate for a two-year-old than an adult? Do you engage in power struggles when interacting with someone who reminds you of a family member? You might be regressing back to a younger self-state. If this happens, ask yourself, "How young or old does this part feel?" There is usually an event or situation that triggers regression.

Perfectionism. You want to see yourself as capable and strong, and you probably want others to see you that way as well. But when you feel the pressure build for everything to be "perfect," and you begin to suffer the consequences of always striving for perfection, it is time to take a step back and allow the imperfect, human, messy parts of yourself to emerge.

Contradictory Thoughts and Feelings. You experience conflicting thoughts, emotions, or desires that pull you in different directions. For example, part of you may want to take a risk, while another part urges caution and safety.

Inner Critic or Saboteur. You have an inner voice that constantly criticizes or undermines your actions and decisions. This critical voice may contradict or undermine positive or productive aspects.

Procrastination. You often find yourself procrastinating or avoiding tasks, indicating resistance or fear of taking action or moving forward.

Feeling Stuck or Indecisive. You have a difficult time making decisions or choices, as different parts of you advocate for conflicting options. This can create confusion, an internal tug-of-war, and difficulty in identifying solutions and reaching resolutions.

You can learn to differentiate yourself from your parts while recognizing you are not defined solely by any one part. This allows you to overcome inner conflict, develop self-leadership, and cultivate compassionate curiosity toward your parts. Instead of suppressing or battling with the parts, you can build a relationship of trust and understanding.

By recognizing and honoring the positive intentions of each part and helping them feel seen and heard, IFS seeks to transform the relationship between parts and promote self-compassion, self-acceptance, and inner peace. The goal is to create an internal environment where your parts feel safe, supported, and aligned with your values and aspirations.

What to Do

Take some time to reflect on your internal parts and their characteristics. Use the following activities and questions to guide your exploration. Write down your responses in the spaces provided. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers, and it is normal to have multiple parts with different qualities. This worksheet is intended to help you deepen your understanding of your internal system.

Identify a specific part: _____

What is the name or label you would give to this part? (e.g., Inner Critic, Bully, Worrier)

How would you describe the role or function of this part in your life? What does it try to achieve or protect?

How does this part typically show up? Describe its thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

What triggers or activates this part?

How does this part interact with other parts?

What positive qualities or intentions does this part have? What does it genuinely want for you?

How does this part believe it is helping or protecting you? What is its underlying concern?

Can you recall any specific memories or experiences from your past that might have contributed to the formation of this part?

Are there any significant events or traumas that this part might be associated with?

How does this part relate to other parts? Are there any conflicts or tensions?

Are there any parts that work alongside or support this part in achieving its goals?

How does the presence of this part affect your daily life, relationships, and well-being?

What challenges or difficulties arise when this part is active?

How do you currently respond to this part when it shows up? Are you able to engage with it constructively?

How might you express curiosity, compassion, or understanding toward this part?

What do you believe this part needs to feel heard and supported?

Now, identify a second part: _____

What is the name or label you would give to this part? (e.g., Inner Critic, Bully, Worrier)

How would you describe the role or function of this part in your life? What does it try to achieve or protect?

How does this part typically show up? Describe its thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

What triggers or activates this part?

How does this part interact with other parts?

What positive qualities or intentions does this part have? What does it genuinely want for you?

How does this part believe it is helping or protecting you? What is its underlying concern?

Can you recall any specific memories or experiences from your past that might have contributed to the formation of this part?

Are there any significant events or traumas that this part might be associated with?

How does this part relate to other parts within your internal system? Are there any conflicts or tensions?

Are there any parts that work alongside or support this part in achieving its goals?

How does the presence of this part affect your daily life, relationships, and well-being?

What challenges or difficulties arise when this part is active?

How do you currently respond to this part when it shows up? Are you able to engage with it constructively?

How might you express curiosity, compassion, or understanding toward this part?

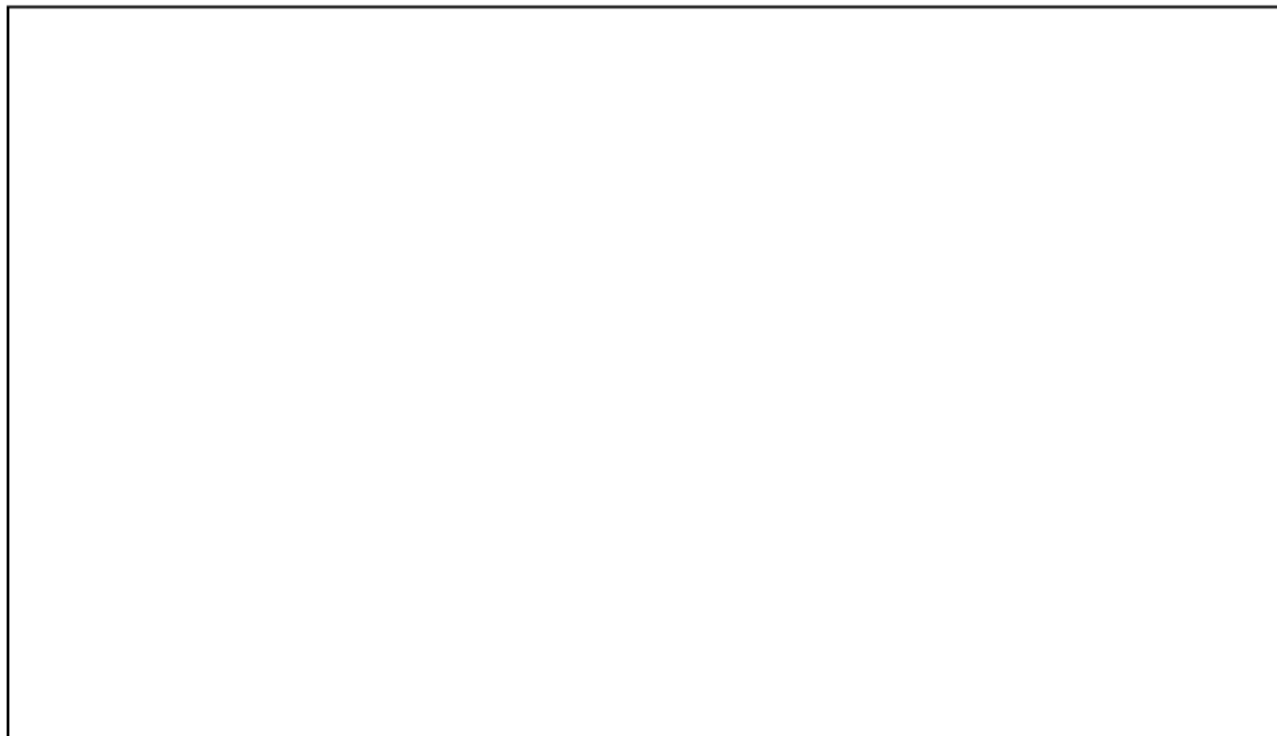
What do you believe this part needs to feel heard and supported?

To address a part that involves internalized anger, you may want to first give that part some space. Bring the “emotional bully” into the room, give it an empty chair, and invite it to a conversation. Perhaps it uses words you heard as a child. Inviting this part to a dialogue allows you to reassure it, challenge beliefs, and come to a healthier agreement. When you do this, you will begin to understand who you are actually angry with. It may be someone who failed to protect you or care for you, or someone that abused or neglected you. You may notice self-blame is misplaced, as it was not reasonable to expect your younger self to protect you. Sometimes this is not about a specific person, but rather sadness that society or the world failed to protect or defend you. Your disappointment or anger may be with the world, society, or with some other construct that “should have” done something. After you do this activity, write about your experience.

One way to shift shame is to catch yourself when you begin thinking negative, shame-filled thoughts, and replace them with healthier ones. You can also notice how your body reacts and change how you interact. For example, if you notice you lean back, lower your voice, or hesitate when engaging with others, you can teach yourself to lean in, speak up, and stand tall.

Describe what you can say or do to shift out of shame.

When you experience regression, draw yourself as an adult gently holding or sitting next to the younger part that was activated. Young parts must be reminded they are not alone and that there is an adult who can guide the way and offer compassion. Draw your picture below.



What will you say to this younger part?

To manage perfectionism, try doing one thing today *on purpose* that is imperfect! What is that like? You may not like what you see or experience, but it may not be as scary or unpleasant as you imagined. That part of you may not have exceptional skills, but it may be a more comfortable, less judgmental part of self that enhances your well-being. Describe what this activity was like for you.

Integration and Healing

Describe the aspects and qualities of your core "Self." It might be helpful to refer to the 8 Cs list above.

Can you imagine a different relationship with the parts you identified in this exercise? How would it look if these parts of your internal system worked together harmoniously? Be specific.

What resources or qualities from your “Self” (your *core essence*) can you bring to support these parts and your internal system as a whole?

Remember, this worksheet is meant to be a tool for self-reflection and exploration. Discussing your responses with your therapist can provide additional insights and support as you engage in your IFS parts work.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
