

Internal Family Systems (IFS) Quick Reference Card

A Clinical Guide for Trauma-Informed Practice

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Core Principles

Principle	Description
Multiplicity of Mind	The mind is naturally multiple, containing many “parts” or subpersonalities. This is normal, not pathological.
Self-Leadership	Everyone has a core Self that possesses innate wisdom and healing capacity. The Self should lead the internal system.
All Parts Have Good Intentions	Even parts with extreme behaviors are trying to help or protect. There are no “bad” parts.
Parts Carry Burdens	Extreme beliefs, emotions, or energies that parts carry are not inherent—they were taken on and can be released.
Healing Through Relationship	Parts heal through relationship with the Self, not through exile, suppression, or elimination.

“All parts are welcome.” — Richard C. Schwartz, Ph.D.

The Three Types of Parts

Exiles

Role: Carry the pain, trauma, shame, and vulnerability from past experiences

Characteristics:

- Often feel young, vulnerable, or wounded
- Carry burdens from past experiences
- May feel abandoned, worthless, or terrified
- Desperately want to be seen and healed
- Can flood the system if triggered

Clinical Note: Exiles are protected by Managers and Firefighters. Don't try to access exiles until protectors give permission.

Managers

Role: Proactive protectors that maintain control and prevent exiles from being triggered

Characteristics:

- Strive for perfection and control
- Plan, organize, and anticipate problems
- May be critical, judgmental, or people-pleasing
- Work hard to keep the person functional
- Fear what will happen if exiles emerge

Clinical Note: Appreciate the hard work of managers. They need to trust the Self before stepping back.

Firefighters

Role: Reactive protectors that emerge when exiles are activated, using extreme measures

Characteristics:

- React impulsively when pain surfaces
- May use substances, food, self-harm, or dissociation
- Can be aggressive or numbing

- Don't care about consequences
- Share the same goal as managers: protect from exile pain

Clinical Note: Firefighters are not the enemy. They're doing an impossible job with limited tools.

The 8 C's of Self

When the Self is present, these qualities naturally emerge:

Quality	Description
Curiosity	Open, interested stance toward parts without judgment
Calm	Centered, grounded presence that remains stable
Clarity	Ability to see situations and parts clearly
Compassion	Deep caring and empathy for all parts
Confidence	Secure sense of ability to handle situations
Courage	Willingness to face difficult emotions and memories
Creativity	Ability to find new solutions and perspectives
Connectedness	Sense of connection to others and something larger

The 5 P's of Self

Additional qualities that indicate Self-presence:

Quality	Description
Presence	Being fully present in the moment
Patience	Allowing things to unfold at their own pace
Perspective	Seeing the bigger picture
Persistence	Continuing despite obstacles
Playfulness	Bringing lightness and humor

The 6 F's: Steps of IFS Therapy

Step	Description	Key Questions
Find	Locate the part in or around the body	"Where do you notice that part?"
Focus	Direct attention to the part	"Can you focus on that part?"
Flesh Out	Learn more about the part	"What does it look like? How old is it?"
Feel	Notice how you feel toward the part	"How do you feel toward that part right now?"
beFriend	Develop a relationship with the part	"Can you let it know you're interested in it?"
Fear	Discover what the part fears	"What is it afraid would happen if it stopped?"

Session Language

Assessing Self-Presence

- "How do you feel toward that part right now?"

- “Can you find that part in or around your body?”
- “What do you notice when you focus on that part?”
- “Is there enough space between you and that part to be curious about it?”
- “Can you ask that worried part to step back so you can get to know this other part?”

Working with Parts

- “What does that part want you to know?”
- “How old does that part seem to be?”
- “What is it afraid would happen if it stopped doing its job?”
- “Does it know that you’re not a child anymore?”
- “What does that part need from you right now?”

Protector Work

- “I appreciate how hard this part has been working to protect you.”
- “What is this part protecting you from?”
- “How long has it been doing this job?”
- “Would it be willing to let you get to know the part it’s protecting?”
- “What would it need to feel safe enough to relax?”

Unburdening

- “Would that part be willing to let go of what it’s been carrying?”
 - “How would it like to release that burden—through light, water, fire, wind, or earth?”
 - “What does that part want to take on in place of the burden?”
 - “How does the part feel now that it’s released that?”
 - “What role would it like to have now that it doesn’t have to carry that anymore?”
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Key Techniques

Non-Imaging Techniques

Technique	Description
Assessing Internal Dialogue	Listening to and exploring conversations between parts
Using IFS Language	Consistently using parts, Self, protectors, exiles terminology
Body Location	Locating where a part is felt in or around the body
Diagrams	Creating visual maps of the internal system
Journaling	Writing dialogues between Self and parts
Direct Access	Therapist speaking directly to a part

Imaging Techniques

Technique	Description
Room Technique	Visualizing a room where Self can meet with parts
Going Back in Time	Self traveling back to be with an exile at the time of wounding
Retrieval	Bringing an exile from the past into the present
Future Imaging	Helping parts envision life after healing
Healing Place	Creating an internal sanctuary for parts
Use of Light	Using imagery of light to release burdens or bring Self-energy

The Unburdening Process

Steps of Unburdening

1. **Witness:** Be present with the exile's pain and story
2. **Retrieval:** Bring the exile from the past into the present

3. **Unburdening:** Release the burdens (beliefs, emotions, sensations)
4. **Invitation:** Invite positive qualities to fill the space

Unburdening Ritual

After witnessing and retrieval:

1. Ask the exile what it wants to release (the burden)
 2. Ask how it wants to release it (water, fire, earth, air, light)
 3. Visualize the release
 4. Ask what qualities it wants to take in
 5. Visualize receiving those qualities
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Complex Trauma Modifications

Extended Stabilization

Complex trauma survivors often need significantly more time before accessing exiles.

- Build robust Self-energy before any exile work
- Develop strong relationships with protectors first
- Ensure adequate window of tolerance

Working with Structural Dissociation

Recognize that complex trauma often involves more rigid part structures.

- Parts may be more autonomous and less aware of each other
- Switching between parts may be more pronounced
- Integration work requires patience and pacing

Pacing Considerations

- Shorter sessions or more breaks

- More time between sessions for integration
- Frequent grounding and Self-energy checks
- Don't rush to unburdening

Protectors May Need Their Own Healing

In complex trauma, protectors often carry their own burdens.

- Protectors may have witnessed the trauma
- They may need unburdening before stepping back
- Honor their experience, not just their function

Quick Reference: What to Do When...

When Client...	Therapist Response
Is blended with a part	Ask if the part can give a little space
Can't find Self	Look for even a small amount of curiosity
Protector won't step back	Spend more time understanding its fears
Gets overwhelmed	Slow down, ground, check for Self
Intellectualizes	Redirect to body sensations
Part won't communicate	Ask what it needs to feel safe

Key Glossary Terms

Term	Definition
Self	Core, undamaged essence with innate wisdom and healing capacity
Parts	Subpersonalities that interact internally; all have positive intentions
Exiles	Young parts carrying pain and vulnerability from past experiences
Managers	Proactive protectors maintaining control and preventing exile activation
Firefighters	Reactive protectors using extreme measures to extinguish overwhelming feelings
Burdens	Extreme beliefs, emotions, or energies parts carry from trauma
Unburdening	Process of releasing burdens through imagery (light, water, fire, earth)
Blending	When a part's feelings overwhelm or take over the Self
Unblending	Creating separation between Self and a part
Polarization	When two or more parts are in conflict with each other
Trailhead	Entry point for exploring the internal system

Contraindications & Cautions

Relative Contraindications (Stabilize First)

- Active suicidal ideation with plan and intent
- Active psychosis
- Severe dissociative disorders (requires specialized adaptation)
- Active substance dependence
- Lack of basic safety in current environment

Requires Adaptation

- Complex PTSD with structural dissociation
 - Clients with limited affect tolerance
 - Clients with cognitive limitations
 - Children and adolescents
 - Clients in crisis
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Therapist Self-Care

Signs Your Parts Are Activated

Sign	Reflection
Feeling protective of client in ways that mirror their protectors	Your own protector parts may be activated
Experiencing similar emotions to client's exiles	You may be blending with your own exiles
Adopting the client's defenses	Your parts may be protecting you from activation
Feeling stuck in the same way the client feels stuck	Parallel process may be occurring
Boundary confusion	Parts of you may be taking on responsibility for client's healing

Recommendation: Regular consultation and your own IFS work are essential for therapists doing this work.

Founder & Historical Context

Dr. Richard C. Schwartz developed Internal Family Systems in the 1980s while working with clients with eating disorders. He noticed that clients spoke of different

“parts” of themselves and that these parts had distinct characteristics and relationships.

Key Insight: Rather than trying to eliminate or suppress problematic parts, healing comes through developing a relationship between the Self and all parts of the system.

Foundational Texts:

- *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (Schwartz, 1995)
- *Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model* (Schwartz, 2001)
- *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness* (Schwartz, 2021)

Evidence Base: IFS has been designated as an evidence-based practice by NREPP (National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices) and has growing research support for PTSD, depression, and other conditions.

Professional Organizations

- **IFS Institute** - ifs-institute.com (Official training and certification)
 - **Foundation for Self Leadership** - foundationifs.org
 - **IFS Therapy Training** - Professional development programs
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This quick reference card is intended as a clinical aid and does not replace comprehensive IFS training. IFS certification requires completion of training through the IFS Institute.

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