

UNDERSTANDING HOW INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS (IFS) WORKS

In the beginning

We are all born as beautiful spiritual beings, full of curiosity and confidence. This is the Self.

The goal of IFS is to have your Self be your leader again.

Shame and blame

Well intentioned parents use shame and blame to motivate behavior change. For example: "I can't believe you messed up again. Try harder." Here, a parent is trying to motivate their child to learn.

This causes an immense amount of pain to a young person.

We protect ourselves

We develop personality traits in reaction to this pain to protect us from feeling shame and blame. For example, we make ourselves quiet, tough, we push for perfection, etc.

These traits typically result in praise or needed distance from our caregivers or hurtful adults and peers.

The protectors persist

Our protector traits don't grow up with us, they stay immature and exaggerated and they keep showing up whenever they feel anything close to shame and blame, to try to protect us. They will not calm down or transform, until the little one they are protecting is healed from their pain. This is why certain behaviors persist even though we know better.

Other popular therapies will focus on managing these behaviors or coping with them so they don't overwhelm you or overtake your life. That approach works...for the short term. It is eventually exhausting because your unwanted traits will persist and have to always be managed.

How IFS is different

IFS facilitates a process to calm your protectors so you can connect with the pain they are protecting you from, listen to the pain, provide a do over, release the pain, and then the protector transforms into something helpful, because it is no longer needed in the form it was in.

This allows your Self to be your natural leader again.

Self is: clear, compassionate, creative, calm, curious, confident, courageous, and connect.

Below is an example to help clarify how IFS works.

In the beginning

Meet Emily, a sensitive and curious child with a vivid imagination, and a heart that craves connection.

Shame and blame

Her parents, unaware of the impact of their words, consistently criticized her for not meeting their expectations. One day, after a disappointing report card, they said, "We know you can do better. Your brother and sister never had these issues; what's holding you back?"

We protect ourselves

To shield herself from this emotional pain, Emily developed an inner critic and perfectionist. She believed (subconsciously) that if she could be perfect, she might finally earn the love and acceptance she yearned for.

The protectors persist

As an adult, Emily's inner critic continued to torment her, setting impossibly high standards. She felt compelled to overachieve and feared any sign of failure. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) offered tools to manage these tendencies, but Emily grew tired of the constant battle with her inner critic.

How IFS is different

Internal Family Systems (IFS) brought a transformative shift. Instead of managing her protectors, Emily utilized IFS to understand and heal the wounded parts of herself. Her relentless perfectionist inner critic, which constantly pushed her to excel, transformed into a supportive coach. This change allowed Emily to pursue her goals with a healthier mindset, finding fulfillment without the burden of unrealistic expectations.

