



Introduction to the

INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS MODELSM

RICHARD C. SCHWARTZ, PH.D.

Chapter One

THE INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS MODEL

Have you ever heard someone say, “Before I can love someone else, I have to learn to love myself” or “My problem is that I lack self-esteem” or “I didn’t want to do it, but I couldn’t stop myself”? Who is the Self that we need to learn to love and esteem, and why is that so hard? Who is it that makes us do things we don’t want to do? Will we be forever hounded by the critical voice in our head that calls us names all the time? Is there a better way to deal with the sense of worthlessness that sits in the pit of our stomach? How can we turn down the noise inside that keeps us anxious and distracted?

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) Model has a set of answers to questions like these that helps people begin to relate to themselves differently—to love themselves. It offers specific steps toward more control over impulsive or automatic reactions. It can transform your inner critical voice into a supportive one and can help you unload feelings of worthlessness. It is capable of helping you not only turn down the noise in your mind but also create an inner atmosphere of light and peace, bringing more confidence, clarity, and creativity to your relationships.

The IFS Model does this by first getting you to focus inside. By “focus inside,” I mean to turn your attention toward your thoughts, emotions, fantasies, images, and sensations—your inner experience. This is a big step for most of us because we’ve been trained by our culture to keep our eyes fixed on the outside world, looking out there for danger as well as for satisfaction. That external focus makes sense because we have a lot to worry about and strive for in our environment, but there’s another reason many of us don’t enter our inner world—we’re afraid of what’s in there. We either know or suspect that deep within us lurk memories and feelings that could overwhelm us, making us feel horrible, impeding our ability to function, making us act impulsively, changing the way we relate to people, and making us vulnerable to being hurt again. This is particularly true if you were ever humiliated and made to feel worthless or if you have suffered losses or traumas in your life. To avoid revisiting any of that, you make sure you’re always active or distracted, never giving the painful memories an opportunity to bubble up. You organize your life in ways that ensure nothing happens to trigger any of those dreaded memories or emotions. You strive to look and act acceptably, work hard to prove you’re valuable, control how close or distant you get in relationships, take care of everyone so they’ll like you, and so on.

Roger considers himself a competent professional, so he can’t believe the way his mind goes blank every time his boss walks into his office. He can’t stand the fact that her mere presence makes him feel so young and stupid. He has given himself pep talks before she comes in, has tried breathing exercises, and has criticized himself for being so fearful, but nothing works.

Susan is very invested in making sure her children like themselves, so she hates the way she sometimes “loses it” with her son. Every so often he’ll do something small—leave his clothes lying around or come home late—and she finds herself yelling at him as if he’d just killed the cat. She often feels her strong reaction coming on, yet she just can’t stop herself. Afterward she’s wracked with guilt and hates herself for it, but it keeps happening.

Despite all he’s accomplished, David is plagued by an underlying sense that he’s worthless. People constantly praise him and tell him what a great person he is, but he can’t take it in. He puts on a good front for others, but inside he’s convinced that if they really knew him, they’d be disgusted. Intellectually, he knows he’s well liked and he tries to convince himself of that, but the powerful feelings of worthlessness persist.

Kim can’t control her eating. She’s tried different diets, worked with nutritionists, and exercised like crazy, yet when the urge for sweets takes over, she’s powerless. She detests the inner voice that seduces her into going to the refrigerator for pints of ice cream, but she can’t resist its siren song.

Margot complains that she’s only attracted to men who are bad for her. Plenty of nice guys are interested in her, but she only feels the chemistry with charismatic men who wind up treating her badly and rejecting her. She feels “doomed by [her] heart to a life of heartache.”

What do all these people have in common? All of them were clients of mine who came to me because of an emotion or impulse they couldn’t control. Not only that, but they fought with it constantly and were furious with themselves for not being able to control it. The uncontrollable impulse was bad enough, but

the relationship they formed with it—their frustration with it and with themselves for having it—permeated their self-concept and made them feel worthless. I find this is often true. The way we relate to a troublesome thought or emotion not only doesn't succeed in controlling it but also compounds our problems. As Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, "If we become angry at our anger, we will have two angers at the same time."

To better illustrate this idea, let's use an analogy to human relationships. Let's think of your anger as one of your children. Suppose you had a son whom you couldn't control—say he threw tantrums every night. That would be bad enough, but suppose that because those tantrums drove you crazy, you constantly criticized him and tried to keep him locked in his room for fear that he'd embarrass you in public. You stayed home on weekends to make sure he didn't run away and felt like a terrible parent because of his behavior. Suppose also that all of your reactions just made the tantrums worse because he sensed that you'd like to be rid of him. Because of the way you relate to your son, the problem comes to consume your life. The same is true with our extreme emotions and irrational beliefs—they're difficult enough, but the way we try to handle them often exacerbates them and makes our lives miserable.

It may seem strange to think of having a relationship with a thought or emotion, but we can't avoid it. They live with us, and we have to relate to them one way or another. Just as with difficult people in your family or work environment, how they affect you and how you interact with them will make a difference. Consider how you feel toward your various thoughts and emotions. Maybe you like the inner voice that reminds you of all the things you

need to do and strategizes how to do them. You listen to it and use it as motivation; you relate to it as if it were a valued assistant. What about when you start to relax and that same voice becomes stridently critical, calling you lazy and telling you the sky will fall if you don't get back to work? How do you like it then? What do you say back to it? If you're like most people, you argue with it internally as if it were an oppressive boss. "Get off my back! Can't you let me sit still for even one minute? Lighten up!" Or you try to drown it out by watching TV or having a few drinks. The part of you that wants you to achieve makes for a wonderful servant but a terrible master, so you have a love/hate relationship with it.

We have ongoing, complex relationships with many different inner voices, thought patterns, and emotions that are similar to relationships we have with other people. What we call "thinking" is often our inner dialogues with different parts of us. Let's take another example. Think of someone you love who has died. How do you feel toward the grief you have about that person? Maybe you fear being overwhelmed by it and hate the way it brings you down. You try to keep it locked up somewhere in your psyche and avoid anything that might remind you of the dead loved one. You also get impatient with it: "Why do I still feel this way after all this time? I thought I'd already worked through all that." You try to turn it into an intrapsychic exile. Yet, like an exile, it keeps popping back up, overtaking you when you're not looking and throwing internal coups.

What about the part of you that gets extremely defensive when you argue with your intimate partner? In the middle of the fight, you suddenly become that part—seeing your partner through its eyes; taking on its distorted, black/white, blame/guilt

perspective; stubbornly refusing to give an inch; and saying nasty things. Later you realize you were out of line and wonder, “Who was it that took over and behaved so obnoxiously? That wasn’t me!” How do you feel toward that inner defender? If you’re like most people, you don’t like some aspects of it, but you feel so vulnerable during a fight that you rely on it for protection. You let it take over because you believe that without it your partner will blow you away. Your anger becomes like a tough bodyguard you like having around but wouldn’t invite to dinner.

All the people I have described in this chapter came to me at war with themselves. They were knotted in dysfunctional inner relationships and, not surprisingly, their outer relationships paralleled their inner ones. By changing the way they regarded and interacted with their thoughts and emotions, they found that not only did the problem they brought to therapy improve dramatically, but, in general, they felt less inner turmoil, liked themselves more, and got along better with the people in their lives.

What was the direction of that change? They moved from hating, fearing, arguing with; trying to ignore, lock up, or get rid of; or giving in to and being overwhelmed by those feelings and beliefs—to becoming curious about them and listening to them. That initial curiosity often led to compassion for their emotions and thoughts, and attempts to help them.

I’ll give an example from my own life. Whenever I had to give a presentation to an audience before I knew this new way of relating to myself, I’d become extremely anxious about how people would like it. As a child, I’d been humiliated in school, so a part of me is stuck in the past, each time certain I’ll be humiliated

again. The ironic thing about emotions like these is that they often create exactly the situation they fear. When the anxiety took over, I wouldn’t be able to prepare well and would come across as insecure and inarticulate, so I got the very feedback that my anxiety feared I would. Because it had such a negative impact on my performance, I had good reason to consider the anxiety my enemy. Whenever I’d begin to feel it, I’d try to reassure myself, “Don’t worry—you know what you’re talking about, and no one wants you to look bad. Besides, even if you bomb, it’s not going to be the end of your career.” That kind of rational self-talk would work only briefly; then the anxiety would creep back in, so I’d get frustrated and escalate my self-criticism. “Why are you such a wimp?! Why can’t you be like all those other people who do this with no sweat?” I’d have running inner conflicts like that up until the presentation. My talk generally would go fine, but I’d spend the next week picking apart every stupid thing I said or smart thing I forgot to say. The whole thing became a terrible ordeal that I dreaded.

Now I’ve learned a way of relating to my anxiety that makes such events interesting challenges rather than dreaded ordeals. Instead of attacking or ignoring my anxiety, I try to get into a curious state, focus inside on it, and ask it some questions. As I focus on the feeling, I notice that it seems to emanate from a knot in my gut, so I focus there while asking internally, “What are you so afraid of?” and then quietly await an answer. Within seconds I hear a weak “voice” (it’s not really a voice as much as a thread of thoughts) spontaneously emerge from the murky depths of my mind and say, “I know I’ll fail and be embarrassed again.” Next, images from my past come to me—scenes of what

happened in school long ago. Suddenly I'm filled with empathy and affection for that shy young kid who was shamed so severely and publicly for being unprepared. In my mind's eye, I hold that boy and remind him that I'm there and that he's not the one who has to do the presentation. I let him know that no matter what happens, I love him. He immediately calms down, and I sense the knot in my stomach release. That whole interaction takes less than a minute and I'm good to go, but that's because some years ago I spent several hours really getting to know that anxious part of me and changing my relationship with it. Now a quick reminder is all it needs.

It might sound strange to ask questions of an emotion, but have you ever felt angry or sad and not known why, and then after a day or so the answer just emerges from inside you? IFS offers a way to expedite that process, which helps you learn not only what your emotions are upset about but also how you can help them calm down and can find out what they need from you. It's a form of self-soothing that is easy for most people once they get the idea. The difficult part is to feel curiosity about or compassion for emotions or beliefs that you are used to hating and wanting to get rid of.

This may seem preposterous at first glance. Why would you want to focus on and try to feel compassion for the critical inner voice that makes you feel small, the paralyzing fear that freezes your brain in high-pressure situations, the anger that can suddenly hijack your mind and hurt others, and the sensitive part of you that's easily hurt and makes you feel worthless? It makes common sense not to go there and, instead, to try to lock all those thoughts and emotions out of your consciousness so you can avoid feeling

bad and can function well. That's what we've been taught to do with difficult emotions and beliefs. But if that approach worked, you wouldn't be reading this book.

That approach is based on the misconception that our extreme emotions and beliefs are what they seem to be. If your anger, fear, self-hate, and sense of worthlessness are merely disturbed emotional states or learned irrational beliefs, it makes sense to try to use your "willpower" to lock them out, argue with them, or counter them with positive thoughts. It makes sense to form an authoritarian, coercive, or dismissive relationship with them because they seem like the enemy within. An unfortunate byproduct of that approach, however, is that you will form similar relationships with people around you who embody qualities of those enemies inside you. You'll become critical of or impatient with anyone who seems fearful, self-deprecating, ashamed, or aggressive.

In these pages, I hope to help you realize that your emotions and thoughts are much more than they seem—that those emotions and thoughts emanate from inner personalities I call *parts* of you. I'm suggesting that what seems like your explosive temper, for example, is more than a bundle of anger. If you were to focus on it and ask it questions, you might learn that it is a protective part of you that defends other vulnerable parts and is in conflict with the parts of you that want to please everyone. It might reveal to you that it has to stay this angry as long as you are so vulnerable and self-sacrificing. You might also learn that it has other feelings, such as fear and sadness, but that it feels as though it must stay in this role of being the angry one to protect you. If you asked it to, it could show you scenes of the point in your life

when it was forced into its protective role. It might even show you an image or representation of itself, such as a dragon, volcano, or tough adolescent kid. Most importantly, it can tell you how you can help to release it so it is no longer stuck in this rageful role. With your help, it can change dramatically into a valuable quality so that you're no longer plagued with a bad temper and instead, for example, have an increased ability to assert yourself appropriately.

That last paragraph may have triggered a part of you that's saying, "This sounds really weird. He's saying I have all these little people inside me who can talk back to me. What does he think, that I'm Sybil?" I don't blame you for being skeptical. I was, too, when my clients initially began talking to me about their parts, but it's one of those things that's difficult to accept until you've experienced it. Until you focus inside, begin intentional conversations with your emotions and thoughts, and are surprised by the answers that come, this will be very hard to believe. I'm not asking you to take it from me—I'm simply inviting you to keep your mind open to this possibility and do your own exploring. Find out for yourself if what I'm saying is possible—that you can help your inner antagonists become your allies. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies."

It is this understanding of our disturbing thoughts and emotions—that they are manifestations of inner personalities that have been forced into extreme roles by events in our lives—which leads us to relate to them differently. It's easy to have compassion for an inner teenager who tried valiantly to protect you in the past and who ended up frozen in time in that angry role, or for a little boy who is terrified to be humiliated again. With this

understanding, we begin to reverse the dysfunctional internal relationships we have formed with many different parts of us and that our parts have formed with one another. As our parts feel more accepted and less threatened or attacked, they transform; once we kiss them, our frogs become princes. As a bonus, we find ourselves more accepting of, and less reactive to, people who used to bother us. We can relate to them with compassion because we're able to do that with the parts of us that resemble them. Sometimes we find that those people transform, too—or at least that our perception of and relationship with them transforms.

Think of how your work environment would be altered if the leaders in your organization related to themselves differently. If they hate the parts of themselves that want to slow down and enjoy life, they will be impatient with workers who aren't as driven as they are. If they want to get rid of their own insecurity and anxiety, they'll create an atmosphere in which people fear for their jobs if they show vulnerability. If they attack themselves for making mistakes, everyone will pretend to be perfect. If they fear their own inner critics, they'll fear the judgment of others and let people become exploitive. On the other hand, if they can relate to those parts of themselves in caring ways, that compassion and acceptance will permeate the company, making it much easier for all the employees to relate compassionately to their own parts and to one another. The same process applies to your inner family.

This new way of relating to yourself can't be forced. It doesn't work to command yourself to be curious about these parts of you or pretend to feel compassion for them. It has to be genuine. So how do you get to that point? This raises the question of who the "you" is who relates to your parts. Who are you at your core?

The most wonderful discovery I have made is that as you do this work, you release, or liberate, what I'll call your Self or your True Self. I find that as people focus on—and, in the process of doing that, separate from—their extreme emotions and thoughts, they spontaneously manifest qualities that make for good leadership, both internally and externally. It seems that we all have qualities like curiosity, compassion, calmness, confidence, courage, clarity, creativity, and connectedness at our core. It's the soul that spiritual traditions talk about but that most psychotherapies don't know about. Your Self gets obscured by all the fear, anger, and shame—all the extreme emotions and beliefs that are pumped into you during your life—so you may not even know it's there.

If you're like most people, you have only caught glimpses of your Self. Maybe your constant inner conversation with and among your parts stopped suddenly when you "lost yourself" in a creative or athletic activity, in the beauty of a sunset or the innocence of children at play, or in a dangerous activity like rock climbing that requires total present-centered awareness. You might remember those experiences as brief moments of complete joy and deep peace. Perhaps you had a fleeting experience of connection to something bigger than yourself and the sense of well-being that accompanies that awareness. You may have dismissed those episodes as anomalies in your otherwise roiling and noisy stream of consciousness and may have assumed you are the noise rather than the peace that lies beneath it. But what if that peaceful, joyful, connected state is who you really are? How might that change your self-concept? And, what if, in addition to having brief peaceful and joyful moments, it were possible to be in that state for long periods of time while going about your daily

activities or even while you're in a conflict with someone? Finally, what if, while in that Self state, you not only felt good, but you spontaneously manifested qualities like guileless curiosity, open-hearted compassion, clarity of perception, and intuitive wisdom about how to relate harmoniously to your parts and to the people in your life? If all that were true, your life could be very different. I have good news for you: all of that is true.

This book is based on an approach to psychotherapy called the Internal Family Systems (IFS) Model, so named because it's as if we each have a family of parts living within us. An IFS therapist first helps a client to focus on and get to know the parts that protect him or her. Then the client asks those parts to relax, to separate their feelings and beliefs from the client in order to open more space inside. As this happens, clients spontaneously report feeling calm, curious, and compassionate—the qualities of Self—toward their parts. I don't have to ask a client to try to feel that way; those qualities just naturally emerge, as if released, when parts relax and separate.

For example, Ted is afraid of his inner critic. As long as he can remember, he has felt oppressed by its constant judgment. When he focuses on it, he finds it in his head and says he hates it. I ask him to change his focus to the part that hates the critic and ask it to separate itself from him. That angry part agrees to do so. I ask Ted how he feels toward the critic now. In a calmer, more confident voice, he says, "I wonder why it feels the need to do this to me." He says his image of it has changed, too. At first it looked like a giant, menacing figure of his father, but now it has shrunk considerably and looks quite a bit younger. No longer intimidated by his critic, Ted begins listening to it tell him about

how hard it works to get him to perform perfectly so that no one will criticize him. Also, it believes that if it makes him feel terrible, he'll be prepared for negative judgments from other people. As he listens, Ted feels increasing gratitude for its attempts to protect him, as well as empathy for how much fear of rejection he senses that it carries. When Ted tells the part he feels that way, the former cold-blooded tormentor breaks down and weeps while Ted holds it. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us."

Once released from his fear, Ted knew what to do to help his critic. Very little leading was needed from me after his anger separated; Ted took over and seemed to know just how to help it. That is a common occurrence in IFS therapy. Just as our bodies know how to heal physical injuries, it seems that we all possess an innate wisdom for healing ourselves emotionally. The difficulty is in accessing that wisdom. IFS provides clear, practical ways to do that and helps you bring more Self into your life in general. It offers a new, uplifting self-concept, a clear and effective way of understanding and working with your troublesome emotions and thoughts, and a method for bringing more Self-leadership into your daily life so you spend more time in, and relate to others from, a state of deep peace and joy. The first step toward those goals is to help you become aware that you are much more than you have been taught.

EXERCISES

Becoming aware of inner family relationships

Take a few moments to think about the relationships you have formed with your different thoughts, emotions, or inner voices. The following is a list of parts that most people experience and sometimes feel oppressed by. After you read each one, consider how you relate to it—how you feel toward it, what you do or say inside when you experience it, how successfully you've exiled it from your life, and how much your relationship with it affects your life.

sexual thoughts or urges

*the inner voice that criticizes your appearance
or performance*

*anxiety that freezes your mind
in high-performance situations*

the urge to eat or drink too much

jealous or possessive feelings about your partner

yearning for intimacy

*worries that flash worst-case scenarios
in your mind about the future*

grief about someone who has died or left you

a nagging sense of worthlessness

*the voice that tells you that you're not working
hard enough and won't let you relax*

*fear that keeps you from taking social risks
and inhibits your liveliness*

the urge to care for everyone and neglect yourself

*the anger that surges forth
when you feel hurt by someone*

sensitive feelings that can be easily hurt

*loneliness that comes up when you're
not distracted or with people*

*competitiveness that makes you feel bad when you learn
that others are doing better than you*

the need to be in control of everything or everyone

an underlying sense of incompetence

the happy or "together" mask you hide behind

*the perfectionist inside you that can't allow
any mistakes or blemishes*

judgmental thoughts you have about other people

*the inertia that makes you sit in front of the TV
or lie in bed*

*a sense of hopelessness that makes small tasks
seem overwhelming*

dissatisfaction with your place in life or your achievements

the belief that you have been victimized in life

I expect you found at least a few thoughts or emotions on the list that you have trouble accepting and instead wish you were rid of. Maybe you have gotten rid of some of them to the extent that you don't experience them very often and don't think of yourself as that kind of person. Pick one item from the list that you had a strong reaction to and think about how hard it would be to change the way you relate to it. Can you imagine approaching it with curiosity and trying to listen to it rather than scolding it or shooing it away? Curiosity is often the first step because until you have heard its reasons for being the way it is, you'll have trouble feeling compassion for it. What fears come to mind as you contemplate this kind of change in your inner relationships?

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Contemplating who you really are

What are your fundamental beliefs about human nature? Are we, at our essence, selfish and aggressive, or have you had personal experiences that contradict this view? How might your view of yourself change if you accepted the idea that your core Self is inherently good, wise, courageous, compassionate, joyful, and calm? Take a few minutes to imagine how your life would be different if you had more access to those qualities on a daily basis and trusted that this calm, joyful Self was your true identity. Think about what might change in relationships with key people in your personal life, in your work or school life, and in future choices you might make.