Internal Family Systems (IFS) Therapy

Client Education & Self-Reflection | Encouraging Hand Trauma Counseling

What is IFS?

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a psychotherapy approach developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz. It offers a way to understand different feelings, beliefs, and reactions as “parts” of our inner experience. For example, one part of you may want connection while another part fears rejection. Having conflicting parts is a common human experience; it does not mean you have multiple personalities.

The central idea: Parts and Self

IFS views parts as attempting to help or protect us, even when their strategies cause problems. It also describes Self as a capacity for grounded, compassionate awareness and leadership. Therapy aims to help you relate to parts with curiosity rather than shame, and to build more flexible responses.

Three common roles parts may take

Managers: Try to prevent pain or rejection by keeping life controlled or predictable. Examples may include perfectionism, people-pleasing, overplanning, or self-criticism.

Firefighters: React quickly when distress breaks through, attempting to stop or numb overwhelming feelings. Examples may include withdrawing, distracting, shutting down, or impulsive coping. These responses may bring short-term relief but longer-term costs.

Exiles: Carry vulnerable feelings or beliefs linked to painful experiences, such as sadness, fear, loneliness, or shame. Protective parts may work hard to keep these feelings out of awareness.

Important: These are flexible descriptions, not diagnoses or fixed categories. One part can play different roles in different situations.

What does “Self-energy” mean?

IFS often describes eight qualities of Self: calmness, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness. You do not need to feel all eight at once. Even a small moment of curiosity toward a difficult reaction can be meaningful.

How IFS may help

With a trained therapist, clients may explore internal conflict, harsh self-talk, protective patterns, trauma-related responses, and relationship difficulties. The aim is not to eliminate parts, but to understand their concerns and help them take on less extreme roles. Research on IFS is developing; it has a smaller evidence base than several established trauma treatments, and outcomes vary.

A simple everyday example

You receive a critical email. A manager urges you to rewrite your reply ten times; an exile may hold feelings of inadequacy; a firefighter wants to avoid the email entirely. From a more grounded stance, you might notice each response, appreciate its protective intention, and choose a measured reply.

Gentle ways to notice your parts

You might silently ask: “A part of me is feeling ___; what is it trying to protect me from?” You can also ask, “Can I be curious about this reaction without needing to change it right now?” If the exercise feels overwhelming, pause, look around, and reconnect with the present. You do not need to access traumatic memories on your

Educational purposes only; not a substitute for professional mental health assessment or treatment.

Mental health crisis: call or text 988. Immediate emergency: call 911.

own.

Client self-reflection

1. When I feel stressed, what different reactions or “parts” do I notice?

_____

2. Is there a protective reaction I usually judge or criticize? What might it be trying to do for me?

_____

3. What helps me feel calm or curious enough to notice my internal experience?

_____

4. What would I like to explore with my therapist about these patterns?

_____

Remember

You are not your most difficult thought, emotion, or reaction. IFS invites a respectful relationship with inner experiences, at a pace that feels safe and collaborative. If noticing parts increases distress or dissociation, tell your therapist so the approach can be adjusted.

Educational purposes only; not a substitute for professional mental health assessment or treatment.

Mental health crisis: call or text 988. Immediate emergency: call 911.