

IFS/12-Step Compatibility *Bill Kavanagh*

I don't know why I was surprised to find that many therapists believe Internal Family Systems Therapy and the 12-Steps (originated by Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939 and adapted by over 200 other types of mutual aid groups) to be mutually exclusive forms of dealing with problems, self-discovery, and learning to grow as human beings. Through my own participation in a 12-Step program and in returning to school to become an addictions counselor and psychotherapist, I learned to believe my extreme parts were "character defects" to be overcome by means of (1) a reliance on a Higher Power, (2) a thorough cleansing of the wreckage of my past, and (3) a concerted effort to help others in my initial predicament. I also learned that alcoholics and other drug addicts are supposed to be notoriously hard to work with because of their denial, resistance to all therapeutic approaches and lack of emotional maturity.

Although I readily embraced the tenets of IFS for myself and for most of my clients, a part of me kept hanging on to the above approach of perceiving alcoholics and other drug addicts (which I will shorten to "addicts" for this article), as if their addictions weren't caused and/or sustained by their own well-meaning but pain-causing parts. It took me quite some time to reorient my thinking to include addictions into my conception of Internal Family Systems Therapy and its healing potential. But I finally did come to realize that not only are the two modalities not mutually exclusive, they are in fact highly compatible. The following is an attempt to answer some of the questions I have heard asked regarding said compatibility of IFST and the 12 Steps.

SPEAKING FROM SELF

Speaking from Self has the inherent honesty that is esteemed, and (hopefully) practiced by 12-Steppers and which is prominent in most 12-Step meetings. Much of the initial appeal of 12-Step meetings on newcomers is the effect people have—when they speak truthfully and candidly (from Self) about their addictions, compulsive behaviors, etc—on people who aren't used to speaking or living honestly and consequently aren't expecting honesty from others. These newcomers are puzzled yet attracted because they have rarely, if ever, encountered such an atmosphere of openness and safety. However even after the initial shock wears off, the newcomers find themselves still drawn to those qualities of Self which they find in meetings.

When newcomers, or any members regardless of length of time in a given program, let go of their defenses (calm their protective parts) they can speak freely and allow themselves to be vulnerable. They find they can (1) trust those around them to respect their anonymity and (2) know they will be heard and understood because of the confidentiality required by 12-Step programs and the absence of cross-talk in meetings. When this occurs, as it does in most 12-Step meetings, Self automatically comes to the fore. Witnesses intuitively recognize Self and respond accordingly—from their own Selves. Twelve Steppers also use what they call the "group conscience" to make decisions. This could be termed a meeting of the Selves of the group members. The members who care to speak (as much as possible from Self) regarding the issue at hand and after discussion a

vote is taken in which the group conscience speaks. Although some members speak from parts, the general outcome is that the Selves of the members come together and Wisdom prevails. Meanwhile, those who expressed opposing points of view usually feel heard and understood by the Selves of the other members and consequently they are able to let go of the urgency of their positions and accept the group conscience peacefully and without rancor. In other words, with an abundance of Self energy in the room, it is difficult to allow baser motives to prevail.

ONE DAY AT A TIME

Because of the “One Day At A Time” (ODAT) approach, some believe 12 Step to be a “here and now” practice, eschewing the past and future. However that particular view of 12-Step work reveals only that the person hasn’t gotten past Step Three. Instead, IFS complements 12-Step work in that we are all “clearing away the wreckage of our past” (steps 4– 9). Only in IFS we offer the parts responsible for the wreckage a productive new life on those parts’ terms in exchange for their letting go of their wreckage-inducing roles. Taken further, living ODAT encourages exactly what IFS “centering exercises” and “going inside” seek: being in the present. This is where the Self is found. Parts exist in the past and the future; this is where the emotional pain resides. The typical addict is a mass of terror, anxiety and resentment, living in the past and the future, never the present. In the past the addict hones those resentments while being consumed by regrets. A great deal of time is also spent worrying about the future. There is also much fantasizing about how wonderful it will be when the addict gets even with those s/ he resents or when the addict gets the attention/respect s/he knows s/he deserves. Twelve-Steppers are encouraged to let go of resentments, worry and fantasy, to focus on what needs to be done in the present moment. Learning to live in the present naturally brings one closer to Self.

CHARACTER DEFECTS/EXTREME PARTS

12-Step programs do have a deficit- or “character defect”- based view which, after some consideration, I have learned to translate to IFS. The primary difference is that 12-Steppers don’t realize their “defects” are trying to work for and not against them. Rather than dismissing all 12-Step philosophy because of this I look at it as I would clients who don’t yet know their parts aren’t trying to hurt them. It is their parts’ thinking that is “defective,” rather than the parts themselves or the parts’ intentions for them.

WORKING WITH EXTREME PARTS/CHARACTER DEFECTS

12-Steppers do know, as we IFSers do, that trying to force a damage-wreaking part out of its job only causes more pain, havoc and wreckage. The 12-Steppers rely on “God as we understood God” to remove the defects of character while IFSers use the Self to witness, appreciate, and acknowledge the parts and to moderate the parts’ release from the bondage of their roles. Many IFS therapists use the idea of a Higher Self connected to our Selves, whose energy and aid can be accessed through Self. Also, the use of guides can

incorporate religious figures that assist in working with and unburdening extreme parts. This of course brings us to . . .

SPIRITUALITY

The idea of trying to live life according to spiritual principles is common to both modalities regardless of how that spirituality is defined. Spirituality is not to be confused with religion. Many people see spirituality as the opposite of materialism: a focus on the inner (and outer) wisdoms available to us all which we seem unable to see or hear when we are focused on the material distractions in life. To many IFS therapists and clients, the Self is directly connected to a higher energy, a spiritual force, God, a god, goddess, or just something bigger than us. As stated previously, some also actively use their own and/or their clients' spiritual/religious beliefs in their use of IFS Therapy.

If clients' parts want to give their burdens to God, Allah, Mary, Jesus, Light, the Elements, etc., then to me it is the same as letting "God remove our defects of character" (steps 6 and 7). There are of course therapists, clients and 12-Steppers who don't believe in or attempt to access anything outside of a person's internal system. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous has an offshoot called AAAA, which is AA for Atheists and Agnostics. While I don't necessarily believe these people to be wrong, I do believe they are missing out on a whole world of therapeutic opportunities. However, in applying the principles of the 12 Steps and utilizing the group conscience they are essentially making use of spiritual components and may be taking advantage of the guidance of a "power greater than themselves" without ever using that terminology.

Both Internal Family Systems and the 12 Step are, to me, exercises in Self-building. The main differences seem to be that while IFS posits Self-building as a primary objective, actively working the 12 Steps allows this to come about gradually. AA's Promises offer what amounts to a life with Self leading and parts in harmony with each other. In both models the vision of the life that can be is a prime motivator for parts to change and grow; to leave behind the old ways (no matter how safe they may have felt in their dysfunctional roles) and to accept the promise of a life that, in AA terminology, is "happy, joyous and free".

As a frame of reference, I have included a copy of the Twelve Steps as written by Alcoholics Anonymous® and practiced by numerous groups which have adopted these steps. I have followed that, in an attempt to further clarify the similarities between the two models, with my interpretation of The Twelve Steps as they might be written for IFS first using 12-Step language and then The Twelve Steps as they might be written for IFS using IFS language. I don't mean to imply that the 12 Steps should or need to be rewritten. Nor do I wish to imply that IFS should adapt and/or adopt a version of the 12 Steps. Please note that I have left steps eight and nine blank in the "using 12-Step language" version. I did this because, after much consideration, I wasn't able to come up with anything I felt that accurately represented these steps in the practice of Internal Family Systems Therapy, given the limitation of using 12-Step language. Please feel free

to replace any of my versions of the Steps with anything with which you feel comfortable.

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS®

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE STEPS AS WRITTEN FOR IFS (USING 12-STEP LANGUAGE)

1. We admitted we were powerless over our parts—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that Self—initially at least, with the help of our therapists—could provide/restore peace of mind.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our life over to the care of Self, as much as our parts would allow.
4. Made a searching, if not systematic, inventory of our parts, witnessing and calming their fears and concerns.
5. Admitted to our parts, to Self, and to our therapists the exact nature of our extreme, negative, pain-causing and vulnerable parts' effects upon our systems.
6. Were entirely ready to have Self unburden these managers, firefighters and exiles.
7. Worked (at least initially with our therapists) to unburden these parts and to allow them new, more productive roles.
- 8.
- 9.
10. Continued to take a parts inventory and when parts are triggered enough to cause pain, to work with them.

11. Sought through therapy, and sometimes through meditation, to improve our conscious contact with Self as much as our parts would allow, seeking Self 's guidance, unconditional love and peace of mind.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we introduce Internal Family Systems Therapy to others when asked, and practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE STEPS AS WRITTEN FOR IFS (USING IFS LANGUAGE)

1. We decided (generally after considerable emotional pain) to make changes in our lives and sought out a therapist to assist in those changes.

2. Were introduced to the IFS concepts and began to accept that Self (initially at least, with the help of our therapists) could achieve/restore harmony among our parts and provide us with peace of mind.

3. Decided to trust in Self, as much as our parts would allow.

4. Used Internal Family Systems Therapy to access and identify our parts one at a time, witnessing and calming their fears and concerns.

5. Worked with our parts, leading and mediating with Self, to discover the nature of our negative, pain-causing and vulnerable parts and their effects upon our systems, witnessing their stories, acknowledging the altruistic and protective nature of their intentions for us, negotiating with polarized parts and offering them new roles of their choosing within our system.

6. Gained our parts' permission to allow Self to unburden these mangers, firefighters and exiles.

7. Worked (at least initially with our therapists) to unburden these parts and to allow them new, more productive roles— the roles they were born to have.

8. Re-witnessed, while working with our parts, the traumatic events (whether real or perceived) that caused our parts to take on extreme, nonproductive roles.

9. Worked in therapy and in our daily lives to bring perspective and closure to these parts' traumas.

10. Continued to monitor our parts and when they were triggered enough to cause pain, to work with them.

11. Used therapy and meditation to continue to become more Self led, as much as our parts would allow, seeking Self 's guidance, unconditional love and peace of mind.

12. Having become more Self led through the use of Internal Family Systems Therapy, we guide others to IFST when they ask about our new "selves", and bring our new peace of mind to every aspect of our lives.

THE AA PROMISES

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows.

Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them. —Alcoholics Anonymous pp 83–84

Reprinted from Self to Self 2005