

Internal Family Systems

Theory + preparation for an introductory parts workshop

Learn the model before you facilitate the experience.

For psychology students, therapists & helping professionals

What this guide is — and is not

- A concise introduction to IFS concepts, language, reading, research and facilitation boundaries.
- Designed to prepare someone to host a bounded psychoeducational parts-exploration workshop.
- It is not a substitute for Level 1 IFS training, clinical supervision, licensure requirements, or competence in trauma treatment.
- If you are not trained to provide IFS psychotherapy, keep the workshop educational and reflective rather than therapeutic.

01

What is IFS?

A systems-based psychotherapy model developed by Richard C. Schwartz.

The mind is naturally multiple

- IFS treats multiplicity as a normal feature of mind: people can contain different feelings, impulses, beliefs and priorities at the same time.
- Everyday language already reflects this: “Part of me wants to go; part of me wants to stay.”
- The model asks us to become curious about relationships among these internal parts rather than forcing perfect internal consistency.

Multiplicity is not automatically pathology.

IFS begins from curiosity about the internal system.

There are no bad parts

- IFS assumes that even extreme or counterproductive parts often developed around an attempt to protect the person.
- A critic may try to prevent failure. Avoidance may try to prevent rejection. Perfectionism may try to prevent shame.
- Understanding a part's intention does not mean endorsing every strategy it uses.
- A useful shift: from “How do I get rid of this?” to “What might this be trying to do for me?”

02

Parts & roles

Managers, firefighters and exiles are roles within a system — not diagnoses or fixed personality types.

Managers

- Managers try to prevent pain, chaos, rejection, shame or vulnerability before it happens.
- They may use planning, perfectionism, achievement, people-pleasing, caretaking, vigilance, control, self-criticism or avoidance.
- Their logic can sound like: “If we stay prepared, nothing bad will happen.”
- Workshop question: What is this part working so hard to prevent?

Firefighters

- Firefighters mobilize when painful emotion has already broken through.
- Their priority is immediate relief: distract, numb, escape, shut down, act, consume, withdraw — anything that reduces distress quickly.
- Managers ask: “How can I prevent pain?” Firefighters ask: “How can I stop pain that is already here?”
- Both are understood as protectors.

Exiles

- Exiles are parts carrying painful emotions, memories, beliefs or unmet needs.
- They may carry shame, fear, loneliness, grief, helplessness, rejection or feelings of worthlessness.
- Protectors may organize around preventing these vulnerable experiences from flooding the system.
- An introductory workshop should not deliberately seek the deepest exile or push participants into traumatic material.

EXAMPLE

See the system, not just the symptom

EXILE

MANAGER

TRIGGER

FIREFIGHTER

“I’m afraid I’m unlovable.” → “Make sure everyone likes us.” → “Something feels rejecting.” → “Shut down. Don’t feel it.”

IFS asks how the parts relate — not merely which behaviour looks problematic.

03

Self & unblending

The aim is not to erase parts, but to relate to them with more space and Self-energy.

The 8 Cs of Self

Calmness

Curiosity

Compassion

Confidence

Courage

Clarity

Creativity

Connectedness

Blending & unblending

“I am anxious.” → “A part of me feels anxious.”

The second phrasing can create room to observe and relate to the experience.

- In IFS, blending refers to being strongly identified with a part.
- Unblending does not mean suppressing or ejecting the part. It means creating enough space to notice it and become curious about it.

04

What to read first

Build enough conceptual grounding before asking other people to explore their internal systems.

Start here

- Richard C. Schwartz — No Bad Parts. Accessible introduction to parts, protectors and Self.
- Richard C. Schwartz — Introduction to Internal Family Systems. Concise introduction to the model.
- IFS Institute — Getting Started resources: glossary, 8 Cs, diagrams, videos and beginner resources.

Go deeper

- Richard C. Schwartz & Martha Sweezy — Internal Family Systems Therapy, 2nd ed. (Guilford Press).
- Covers the model's origins, Self, burdens, protectors, polarization, exiles, therapist role, couples/families and research.
- Frank G. Anderson, Martha Sweezy & Richard Schwartz — Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual.
- Especially useful for step-by-step techniques, cases, meditations, exercises and worksheets.

For group facilitation

Chris Burris — Creating Healing Circles

Using the Internal Family Systems Model in Facilitating Groups

- Focuses specifically on applying IFS concepts and protocols in groups.
- Includes group methodology, exercises and facilitation guidance.
- Use it alongside broader group-facilitation competence and appropriate professional training.

Source: IFS Institute store listing for Creating Healing Circles

05

Evidence check

Teach the model without overselling the science.

What does the evidence say?

- IFS has an emerging research base, with preliminary studies examining depression, PTSD, self-compassion and other outcomes.
- The evidence is promising but still smaller and less replicated than the evidence base for several established psychotherapies.
- Larger randomized trials, replication and more systematic study of adverse effects are still needed.
- Best language for a resource: promising and developing — not definitively established across conditions.

A recent research milestone

- A 2026 randomized trial evaluated PARTS, a 16-week group intervention derived from IFS, for PTSD.
- Both PARTS and the active comparison condition showed substantial PTSD symptom reductions; PARTS showed higher attendance and satisfaction.
- This is useful evidence of feasibility and promise, but it should not be presented as final proof of IFS efficacy.

06

Facilitation boundaries

The safest workshop is educational, voluntary, non-diagnostic and deliberately non-deep.

What an introductory workshop can do

- Teach basic IFS concepts and language.
- Normalize internal multiplicity.
- Help participants notice everyday parts and patterns.
- Practice curiosity toward a manageable protector.
- Map relationships between parts.
- Introduce Self qualities and gentle unblending.
- Offer optional written reflection without requiring disclosure.

What it should not do

- Do not deliberately guide participants into traumatic memories or ask for the “deepest exile.”
- Do not attempt exile retrieval or unburdening without appropriate clinical competence.
- Do not interpret another person’s parts, diagnose them, or tell them what a part “really means.”
- Do not pressure disclosure or treat imagery/memory arising in an exercise as verified fact.
- Do not imply that every behaviour necessarily has the explanation suggested by IFS.

If someone becomes overwhelmed

- Pause the exercise and orient attention back to the external room.
- Invite them to notice where they are, feel their feet or chair, look around, drink water, or step out.
- Do not respond by trying to locate an exile or intensify the exploration.
- In clinical or institutional settings, follow established safety procedures and your professional scope.

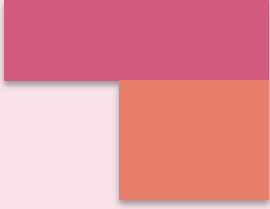
Curiosity is more important than intensity.

Preparation pathway

- Curious learner → No Bad Parts + official introductory resources.
- Psychology / counselling student → add Internal Family Systems Therapy + Skills Training Manual + research review.
- Educational workshop facilitator → add Creating Healing Circles + group-facilitation and psychological-safety competence.
- IFS psychotherapy provider → formal clinical education, supervision and appropriate IFS professional training.

Core references

- Anderson, F. G., Sweezy, M., & Schwartz, R. C. (2017). Internal Family Systems Skills Training Manual. PESI.
- Burris, C. (2022). Creating Healing Circles: Using the Internal Family Systems Model in Facilitating Groups.
- Schwartz, R. C., & Sweezy, M. (2019). Internal Family Systems Therapy (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- IFS Institute. Getting Started resources, 8 Cs of Self, bibliography, community guidance and research overview.



Next:

Facilitate the workshop

Use the separate “Meet Your Parts” deck for the actual participant experience.

LEARN → PREPARE → FACILITATE

PsyMosaïque IFS facilitator toolkit