

# The Internal Family Systems Model Outline

## I. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE IFS MODEL

- A It is the nature of the mind to be subdivided into an indeterminate number of subpersonalities or parts.
- B Everyone has a Self, and the Self can and should lead the individual's internal system.
- C The non-extreme intention of each part is something positive for the individual. There are no "bad" parts, and the goal of therapy is not to eliminate parts but instead to help them find their non-extreme roles.
- D As we develop, our parts develop and form a complex system of interactions among themselves; therefore, systems theory can be applied to the internal system. When the system is reorganized, parts can change rapidly.
- E Changes in the internal system will affect changes in the external system and vice versa. The implication of this assumption is that both the internal and external levels of system should be assessed.

## II. OVERALL GOALS OF THERAPY

- A To achieve balance and harmony within the internal system
- B To differentiate and elevate the Self so it can be an effective leader in the system
- C When the Self is in the lead, the parts will provide input to the Self but will respect the leadership and ultimate decision making of the Self.
- D All parts will exist and lend talents that reflect their non-extreme intentions.

## III. PARTS

- A Subpersonalities are aspects of our personality that interact internally in sequences and styles that are similar to the ways in which people interact.
- B Parts may be experienced in any number of ways -- thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, and more.
- C All parts want something positive for the individual and will use a variety of strategies to gain influence within the internal system.
- D Parts develop a complex system of interactions among themselves. Polarizations develop as parts try to gain influence within the system.
- E While experiences affect parts, parts are not created by the experiences. They are always in existence, either as potential or actuality.
- F Parts that become extreme are carrying "burdens" -- energies that are not inherent in the function of the part and don't belong to the nature of the part, such as extreme beliefs, emotions, or fantasies. Parts can be helped to "unburden" and return to their natural balance.
- G Parts that have lost trust in the leadership of the Self will "blend" with or take over the Self.

#### **IV. SELF**

- A Different level of entity than the parts -- often in the center of the "you" that the parts are talking to or that likes or dislikes, listens to, or shuts out various parts
- B When differentiated, the Self is competent, secure, self-assured, relaxed, and able to listen and respond to feedback.
- C The Self can and should lead the internal system.
- D Various levels of experience of the Self:
  - 1 When completely differentiated from all parts (Self alone), people describe a feeling of being "centered."
  - 2 When the individual is "in Self" or when the Self is in the lead while interacting with others (day-to-day experience), the Self is experienced along with the non-extreme aspects of the parts.
- E An empowering aspect of the model is that everyone has a Self.

#### **V. GENERAL GROUPS OF PARTS**

##### **A EXILES**

- 1 Young parts that have experienced trauma and often become isolated from the rest of the system in an effort to protect the individual from feeling the pain, terror, fear, and so on, of these parts
- 2 If exiled, can become increasingly extreme and desperate in an effort to be cared for and tell their story
- 3 Can leave the individual feeling fragile and vulnerable

##### **B MANAGERS**

- 1 Parts that run the day-to-day life of the individual
- 2 Attempt to keep the individual in control of every situation and relationship in an effort to protect parts from feeling any hurt or rejection
- 3 Can do this in any number of ways or through a combination of parts -- striving, controlling, evaluating, caretaking, terrorizing, and so on.

##### **C FIREFIGHTERS**

- 1 Group of parts that react when exiles are activated in an effort to control and extinguish their feelings
- 2 Can do this in any number of ways, including drug or alcohol use, self-mutilation (cutting), binge-eating, sex binges
- 3 Have the same goals as managers (to keep exiles away) but different strategies

#### **VI. BEGINNING TO USE THE MODEL**

- A Assess client's parts and sequences around the problem.
- B Look for polarizations:
  - 1 Within individuals
  - 2 Among family members
- C Look for parallel dynamics: The way you relate to your own parts

parallels the way you relate to those parts of others.

- D Introduce the language of the model.
- E Check for individual's awareness of parts -- ask how he or she experiences the part: thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, and so on.
- F When working with families, check for the family's awareness of parts in self and others.
- G Make a decision about how to begin using the model: language, direct access, imagery, and so on.
- H Come to agreement with client on initial goals of therapy in terms of the internal system -- create a "contract."
- I Assess the fears of manager parts and value the roles of the managers; explain how the therapy can work without the feared outcomes of the managers happening.
- J Inventory dangerous firefighters; work with managers' fears about triggering firefighters.
- K Assess client's external context and constraints to doing this work.

## **VII. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SYSTEMS**

- A The way you relate to your own parts parallels the way you relate to those parts of others.
- B Individual's internal system affects and is affected by the external system of which he or she is a part.
- C Internal and external systems often parallel each other.

## **VIII. WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS**

- A Protective Parts
  - 1 Important to assess protective parts and work with them first.
  - 2 Develop a direct relationship with the part.
  - 3 May need to negotiate pace of work -- give the part an opportunity to talk about concerns.
  - 4 Work out a system for the part to let you know when things are moving too fast.
  - 5 Respect the concerns of the part.
- B Non-imaging techniques
  - 1 Assessing internal dialogue
  - 2 Using the IFS language
  - 3 Location/sense of a part in the body
  - 4 Diagrams -- relationships among parts
  - 5 Journaling
  - 6 Direct access:
    - Therapist to parts
    - Self to parts
    - Part to part
- C Imaging
  - 1 Room technique
  - 2 Mountain or path exercise

- 3 Going back in time with a part, then "unburdening"
- 4 Bringing parts into the present -- "retrieval"
- 5 Future imaging
- 6 Working with more than one part
- 7 Confronting abuse/significant others
- 8 Horizon/healing place
- 9 Use of light
- D Concept of Blending: keeping the feelings of the part from overwhelming the Self
  - 1 Working with the Self to understand why/how not to blend
  - 2 Working with the part to understand why/how not to blend
- E Working with young children
  - 1 Assess developmental level of child and whether need to be concrete or able to use imaging techniques
  - 2 Be creative, use modalities comfortable to child -- art, play techniques
  - 3 Children respond well to techniques that externalize parts and then involve interacting with the parts, such as sandtray, puppets, and so on.

## **IX. WORKING WITH FAMILIES**

- A Introduce IFS language (power of IFS language vs. monolithic language)
  - 1 Language is powerful in changing sequences.
  - 2 Language frees people from seeing themselves (and others) in extreme ways.
- B Looking for parts that are activated in session.
  - 1 Identifying sequences (both internal and external)
  - 2 Selves working together to keep extreme parts of each family member from interfering
- C Enactments
  - 1 Set up enactments of family.
  - 2 Set up enactments of sequences/relationship among parts of individual family members.
- D Work with one family member while others watch.
  - 1 Establish safety: Family members not to analyze parts outside of session
  - 2 Contract not to talk about others' parts; can talk about own parts
  - 3 No matter what others are doing, individual always responsible for own parts
  - 4 Ask for reactions of others who are watching.
  - 5 Try to alternate among family members.
- E Working with one member outside of family sessions
  - 1 Emphasize taking responsibility for own parts and help practice accessing Self.

- F General frame of Selves working together to keep extreme parts of each family member from interfering

#### **X. CONSTRAINTS TO THE WORK**

- A Therapist's parts (rational/scientific, approval, worrier, protective)
- B Protective parts of client
- C Protective parts of other family members
- D External system unsupportive or abusive

#### **XI. COMMON THERAPIST MISTAKES**

- A Working with exile before system is ready.
- B Therapist assumes he/she is talking to person's Self when is talking to a part.
- C Therapist thinks Self is doing the work, but it's really a part.

#### **XII. TROUBLESHOOTING PROBLEMS**

- A Helping Self to distance from/unblend from parts
- B Dealing with extreme parts

#### **XIII. STRENGTHS OF THE MODEL**

- A Focuses on strengths: the undamaged core of the Self, the ability of parts to shift into positive roles
- B IFS language provides a way to look at oneself and others differently.
- C Language encourages self-disclosure and taking responsibility for behavior.
- D IFS language is powerful.
- E Provides a way to work with "resistance" and denial
- F Ecological understanding of entire therapy system, including therapist
- G Respect for individual's experience of the problem
  - 1 Clients provide the material -- the therapist doesn't have to have all the ideas.
  - 2 Therapist looks at client's Self as "co-therapist" and trusts the wisdom of the internal system.