

Internal Family Systems and Parts Work

Approaching inner conflict with curiosity, compassion, and care.

A compassionate map of inner conflict

Many people come to therapy feeling divided inside. One part may want closeness while another pulls away. One part may want rest while another demands productivity. One part may long to be seen while another fears exposure. One part may want change while another is frightened by what change might cost.

Internal Family Systems, often called IFS, offers a compassionate way of understanding this inner complexity. Rather than treating anxious, controlling, avoidant, pleasing, self-critical, or numb parts as problems to eliminate, IFS invites curiosity about what those parts may be trying to do.

Protective parts are not enemies

In IFS-informed work, protective parts are usually understood as trying to help. A part that criticizes may be trying to prevent rejection or humiliation. A part that withdraws may be trying to prevent disappointment or overwhelm. A part that stays busy may be trying to keep grief, shame, or fear at a distance.

These strategies may cause suffering now, but they often began as efforts to protect something vulnerable. The work is not to shame these parts or force them to disappear. The work is to understand them well enough that new possibilities can emerge.

Questions we may explore

- What is this part trying to protect?
- What is it afraid would happen if it relaxed?
- How long has it been carrying this role?
- What does this part need in order to trust that there may be another way?
- What wounded, exiled, or vulnerable place might be beneath the protection?

Self-leadership and integration

IFS also points toward what is often called Self-leadership: a steadier, wiser, more compassionate center from which a person can relate to all parts of themselves. In this state, inner conflict may become less like a war and more like a conversation.

Parts work fits naturally with depth-oriented psychotherapy because it honors both protection and vulnerability. It helps connect present reactions with earlier adaptations while supporting greater internal

spaciousness, tenderness, and choice.