Internal Family systems Therapy (IFS)

“Who ARE You?” (This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation) Alice replied, rather shyly; “I--I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

Lewis Carroll. Alice in Wonderland

“I am the sum of my parts. Everything I’ve ever done and everything I’ve ever achieved and everything I have ever been.”

— Jen Larsen, Future Perfect

“I’m still learning to love the parts of myself no one claps for”

Rudy Francisco

What is IFS?

Having been ‘one’ with our mother in-utero, we are born into the pain of the world arguably fragmented and without question vulnerable to the vagaries of parenting (those of us who have been children know this and those of us that have been parents know that we don’t necessarily learn from this). For the next four years are so our parents do their best to socially regulate us and support us to reach integration.

Trauma fragments us. If we experience a trauma post age four there is a strong argument that because we have integrated, we know our core self, it is easier to find our way back there. However, if we experienced trauma or repeated trauma pre age four then our already fragmented self is further polarised and if we don’t know what integration is, how easily can we find it?

We have a period of relative calm after age four where we deepen our sense of self in relation to our parenting experience. As we reach adolescence our developmental task is to essentially fragment, cast aside those parts that no longer fit, keep those ones that do and develop a new image of ourselves that will take us over the bridge into adulthood. This is a hard task for all young people with a strong sense of self and integration. Consider those harmed in early childhood who haven’t mastered integration. How can you fragment from a place of already being fragmented and find a clear identity? Little wonder so many of our young people who have experienced multiple losses struggle.

IFS identifies five basic assumptions

1. It is the nature of the mind to be subdivided into an indeterminate number of subpersonalities or parts.
2. That everyone has a Self. That the Self can and should lead the individuals internal system.
3. 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 eliminate parts but instead to find their non-extreme role.
4. As we develop, our parts develop and form a complex system of interactions amongst themselves, system theory can be applied to the internal system. When the system is reorganised, parts can change rapidly.

“You are mistaken if you think we have to lower ourselves to communicate with children. On the contrary, we have to reach up to their feelings, stretch, stand on our tiptoes.”

Janusz Korczak 1925
5. Changes in the internal system will effect 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.

If you see children and young people in your care who seem to scroll or change rapidly their presentation in different situations or under differing stress, it may be that their parts are taking over to manage in a way that seemed reasonable in previous situations. For example, a child living in danger and fear with their birth parents may develop a strategy that helps them to emotionally survive this experience. However, when they move into foster care the same strategy is used, but the need no longer applies, leaving carers confused, helpless and placements in jeopardy.

**IFS Identifies four basic goals to their intervention**

1. To achieve balance and harmony within the internal system
2. To help parts release their burdens so they can find their preferred roles in the system.
3. To differentiate and release Self. When Self is in the lead, it respects input from the parts, who in turn resect self to effectively lead the system.
4. To effect the external systems to have more Self energy.

**IFS Research base**

Wark, Linda; Thomas, Melanie; Peterson, Sahri (April 2001). "Internal family systems therapy for children in family therapy". Journal of Marital & Family Therapy. 27 (2): 189–200


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