

Internal Family Systems: Seeing the Heart of the Matter

Albert Schweitzer said: *Each patient carries his own doctor inside him. They come to us not knowing that truth. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to work.* This wisdom is a core tenet in a relatively new model of therapy, Internal Family Systems. Richard Schwartz, founder of Internal Family Systems, calls this doctor inside each of us “Self.” The elegance of this new model is that it integrates the experience and use of “Self” with a variety of familiar theoretical frameworks and clinical interventions.

Internal Family Systems (IFS) originated by applying concepts from family systems theory and practice to the inner world. IFS views the multiplicity of the mind as our natural state. Defenses, symptoms and behaviors are “parts” of the inner world that exist and operate like the roles and alliances of individuals within families, carrying their own burdens, missions, and having complex relationships between themselves. The intensity of inner tension decreases as one understands the parts’ origins and roles. Then the innate compassion, curiosity and calm that lies within each of us is released and the inner resources of perspective, courage, and creativity are available to facilitate healing.

The IFS paradigm offers clear techniques to establish a collaborative therapeutic relationship; to develop genuine appreciation for the protective function of defenses; to integrate somatic experience, and to resource qualities of resilience. In practice, there is an unequivocal emphasis on the client’s relationship with their inner world and the formation of a connection with the inner world’s “parts” as treasured friends. As my comfort using the model grows, I more easily relax my own defenses to deepen the therapeutic container created in the office. I regularly experience a profound, felt sense of compassion for myself and others. I more readily “see” the core pain and vulnerability a client carries. The theory and practice of IFS has deepened my ability to “see” the heart of the matter.

I have found the model helpful for a wide range of clinical presentations, in particular for my clients struggling with trauma, eating disorders, cancer and for those who experienced childhood neglect and abandonment. Clinicians comfortable in intrapsychic, relational, Jungian, Gestalt, psychosynthesis, family systems, and/or attachment theory will discover much that is familiar. Those of you who have studied EMDR, sensorimotor, somatic-experiencing, psychodrama, hypnosis, focusing, and/or narrative therapy will easily weave your current practices within this comprehensive conceptual framework. If you are exploring the integration of mindfulness and psychotherapy, IFS will resonate with you as well.

I will further present on Internal Family Systems, both theory and practice, at our NASW Social Work Symposium, Thursday morning, April 10, 2008. I look forward to seeing you and speaking with you about the “Heart of the Matter.”

