

TRAUMA HEALING THROUGH THE LENS OF

Internal Family Systems (IFS)

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Three learning objectives

- 01** Describe the core principles of Internal Family Systems (IFS) and its conceptualization of trauma.
- 02** Differentiate the roles of Self, protectors, and exiles in trauma responses and the healing process.
- 03** Identify introductory clinical strategies for incorporating an IFS-informed approach into trauma treatment.

Why IFS for Trauma Healing?

- Addresses the *cognitive* — the thoughts and beliefs parts carry
- Incorporates the *body* — supports movement and discharge of sensation
- Facilitates release of painful *feeling* by healing the wound, not just managing the symptom



Bruce Hershey — New Perspective

selfleadership.org

A non-pathological model of the mind

The core assumptions of IFS:

- All parts are welcome
- All parts have good intentions
- Parts are not their burdens or their job — an extreme role is not an identity
- We all have Self-energy

*The mind is naturally multiple
Rooted in systems thinking*

Self or “Self-energy”

- Core essence
- Presence
- Inner Wisdom
- Soul
- Heart-centered
- Loving Awareness

We all have Self
Not tarnished from any experience



Self: the 8 C's

Calm

Curiosity

Compassion

Clarity

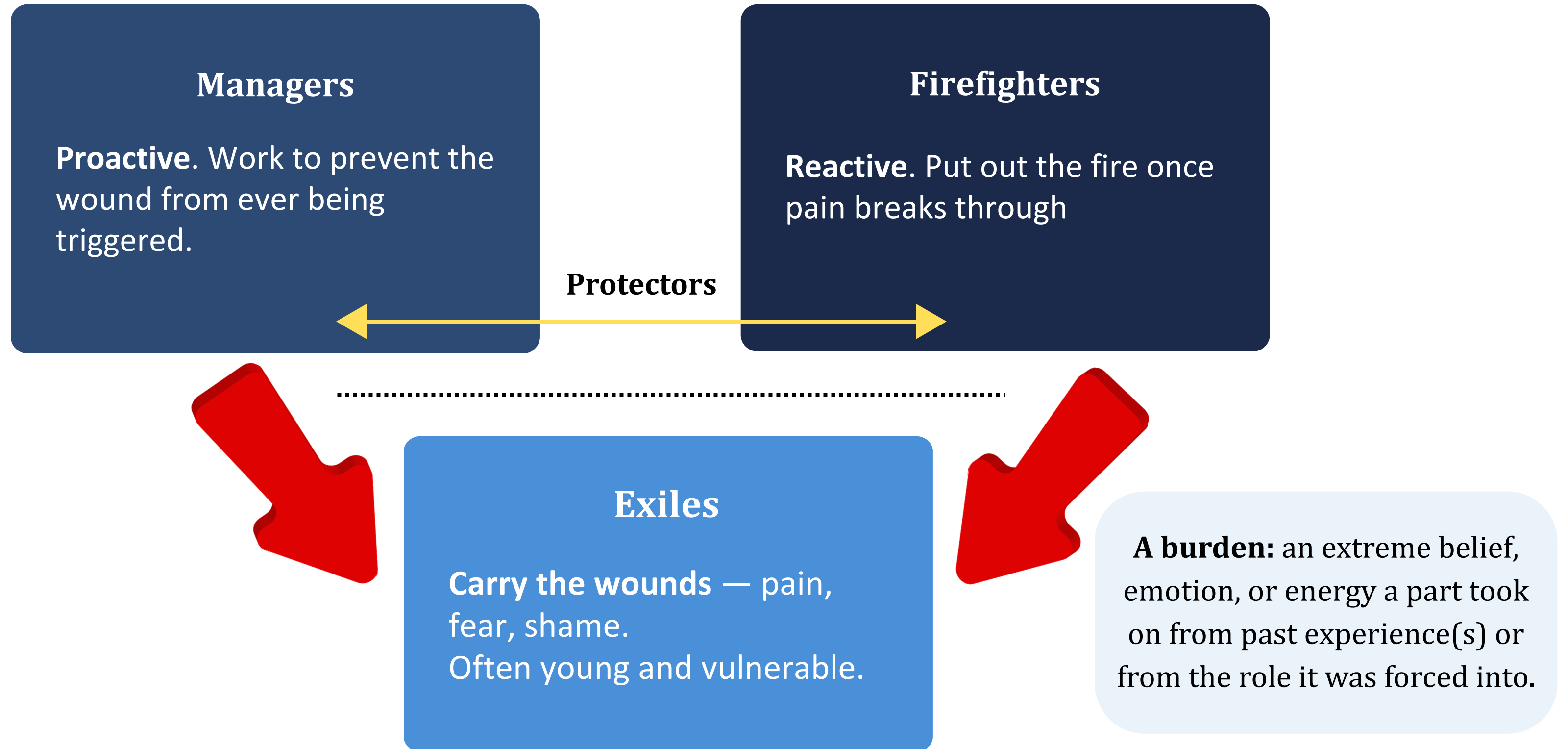
Courage

Creativity

Confidence

Connectedness

Three types of parts



Practice



What trauma does to the system

- **Protectors are forced into extreme roles; wounded parts carry painful experiences and burdens**
- **Wounded parts may carry pain, fear, shame, unmet needs, isolation, and legacy burdens**
- **“Parts are not their wounds” — beneath the burden, parts retain their creativity, sensitivity, love, and playfulness**
- **IFS helps release parts from extreme roles, unburden wounded parts, and restore trust in Self-leadership**

Trauma can organize protectors into very different roles

Shut down/disconnect

- dissociative
- numbing
- conflict-avoidant

Control/manage

- controlling
- critical
- vigilant/panicked

Act out/discharge

- rageful
- shaming
- addictive/substance-using

Different presentations, different protective intentions —
each part is trying, in its own way, to protect the system
(keep exiles/vulnerability buried).

Two common types of protection: activated & blunted

Activated / hyperaroused

High emotion, high physical sensation,
low access to reflective thinking.

*Respond with compassion, calm,
unblended Self — may need direct
access.*

e.g., the angry, fed-up drinking part

Blunted / hypoaroused

Withdrawn, shut down, little access to
thought, feeling, or sensation.

*Empathic resonance helps bring the
client back 'online'; direct access if
needed.*

e.g., the hopeless, withdrawn drinking part

Using the model: the 6 F's

- **Find** – the part
- **Focus** – on it, go inside
- **Feel towards it** – your Self-energy detector
- **Befriend** – build the relationship
- **Find out** – what it wants you to know
- **Fear** – what would happen if it stopped doing its job?

Working with protective parts with trauma

- **Update the part –** It's often stuck in time of trauma. Ask what year it thinks it is; introduce it to the Self of today — may include an apology for the wait.
- **The invitation –** Parts step back once they feel heard, seen, and validated — “of course, it makes sense you'd do that.”
- **Negotiate intensity –** Ask the part to soften by 20% – this allows Self to be with and listen better.
- **Direct access –** Speak to the part directly when it won't unblend from the client.

"Being **respectful** and getting **permission** are my main priorities when encountering traumatized protective parts. My job is to help them **feel valid and appreciated for their heroic efforts, aid them in relinquishing their duties, and get them to allow us to unload the damage** caused by other people's harsh words, poor behavior, and lack of caring."

Dr. Frank Anderson

Common protector fears

- Overwhelm — the pain will be too much
- The secret will be exposed
- They'll lose their job or role
- Other parts will be triggered
- They'll be judged
- The therapist / Self can't handle it
- The system can't handle change — positive change itself can trigger backlash, especially in trauma survivors

What to continually offer a protective part

“You're the boss”

“We won't do
anything without
your permission.”

Validate

“I get why you're
feeling this way —
that makes sense.”

Offer hope

“What if we were
able to heal the
wound?”

An overview of unburdening

Presented for orientation only. Full unburdening work is taught in an IFS Level 1 training. To prevent harm/backlash it is not advised to guide this process without training.

1. Witness — the part shows Self what it needs seen or known
2. Retrieval — go into the scene and get the part out, present with it the way it needed someone to be
3. Unload — release the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs it has carried
4. Enter new qualities — the part takes on what it needed instead
5. Protectors check in — they see the change and reassess their job
6. Follow-up — client checks in with the part from Self over the following weeks

The therapist's Parts & Self-energy

Notice your own parts

- When activated, therapists may *give too much*, *withhold too much*, offer *advice*, or act *rigidly*
- This can trigger parts in the client
- Notice, invite your parts to step back, and stay Self-led
 - especially critical with trauma survivors

Ways to bring IFS into your sessions

Notice your own parts — what gets activated in you, and can you invite it to step back

Get curious about a client's protector — what's its job? what's are its fears and concerns?

Slow is fast — permission from protectors before the wound. What is this 'resistance' trying to do?

Next steps to learn more...

Training

IFS Institute — ifs-institute.com; Official training pathway (Levels 1–3)

Reading

Transcending Trauma — Frank Anderson, MD

Internal Family Systems Therapy 2nd ed.— Richard Schwartz & Martha Sweezy

No Bad Parts — Richard Schwartz

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Thank you!