
The Internal Family Systems Model (IFS)

IFS maintains the individual's personality is multiplicitous, that is, made up of "parts". This is a non-pathologizing model that maintains that everyone has parts and that each part has good intentions for the system. The "**all parts are welcome**" position indicates that "**there are no bad parts**", just parts that have been pushed into extreme roles due to painful burdens of trauma and other negative life experiences. Richard Schwartz, the founder of IFS, has explained that we are born with parts and that they assist us in everyday life. Negative and traumatic experiences push parts into extreme roles as the internal system tries to achieve balance by exiling parts that hold emotional pain which are called **burdens**. Each part can be considered a sentient being and has their own belief system, memories, physical sensations and impulses, and body memories. There are three categories of parts: **managers, firefighters and exiles**. Managers are *proactive* to protect the system from the emotional overwhelm of exiles. Firefighters are *reactive* protectors that numb or distract the system from the overwhelm of exiles. Exiles hold the burdens (traumas) of the system.

A vital component of the IFS model is "**Self-Energy**". The "Self" is not a part. It does not need to be fostered to grow or to be healed. It is something intact that we are all born with. Some consider the Self as the purest part of ourselves, the soul or spirit, or the connection to source. It can be viewed as containing the spark of the universe within our humanness. The Self supports our system's natural movement towards balance, harmony and rhythm. "**Polarizations**" of parts at odds with each other are embedded within this innate tendency. **Self-Leadership** and **awareness** are the golden tickets to righting the ship in a sea of inner confusion, disconnection and trauma.

Dick Schwartz identified eight Self-Leadership qualities: **curiosity, compassion, connectedness, clarity, courage, confidence, calmness, and creativity**. Cece Sykes, a lead IFS trainer, often teaches about another C – **choice**. Another lead trainer, Mary Kruger, offers her own C – **centeredness**. I propose that other C's can be included as Self qualities, such as **consent** (as IFS is a model of permission), **consciousness, community, collaboration, commitment, contentment, and comfort**. It is important to note that other words that denote open-heartedness are also facets of Self-Energy.

IFS therapists strive to be "Self-Led" as they facilitate the client getting to know and "un-blending" from parts (differentiating from parts and creating more access to Self-Energy) and using the "6F's" to get to know protectors: find, focus, flesh out, feel toward, befriend, and finding the fear. Working with all parts takes the "5P's": patience, perspective, persistence, perseverance, and playfulness. IFS focuses on internal attachment and building trust within the "Self-to-part" relationship. This allows permission from protectors to work with exiles and facilitate the unburdening process of un-blending, creating trust between Self and part, witnessing, retrieval, unburdening, invitation, integration, appreciation, and reconsolidation.

Sky constellations are a useful metaphor in conceptualizing the internal system when parts are pushed into extreme roles. Each constellation is organized by an event or predominant interaction for the client. There can be many manager and firefighter parts that are connected by a common principle or goal to protect the system within a constellation. These parts will emerge as a security system to ensure that the pain and suffering stay suppressed, thereby exiling parts that hold the pain of the experience(s). Befriending protector parts are a large part of the work in IFS and make accessing the exiles safer and the unburdening process go more smoothly.

Trauma processing in IFS is about facilitating a client to “**go inside**” and attune to their inner world and their experiences of themselves. **Being a witness and observing rather than being absorbed** by the trauma energy (being blended) in their system establishes **regulation** and allows the client to give themselves what they needed during a time of pain. Being blended with a part means that the person is the part and speak from it instead of for it. Differentiation of Self and part is an intention but not an agenda.

There are three different styles of interventions in IFS: insight-oriented processing, implicit direct access and explicit direct access. Application of these interventions is based upon the client’s level of blended-ness. Insight oriented IFS is facilitated by the therapist in guiding the client to connect with their parts. Implicit direct access appears more akin to traditional talk therapy in that the therapist is speaking directly to the part and knows they are talking to a part. Explicit direct access is when the condition calls for the therapist to ask the client if they can speak to the part, while the client is aware and listening.

In my experience, explicit direct access is primary used when a client has awareness that they are blended but is too dysregulated to foster a Self-to-part connection. The therapist then talks with the part to help facilitate more internal space. There are also times when it is helpful for the client to “embody” a part, meaning asking the part to step forward and to blend a little. This can be helpful in equine engaged psychotherapy as it assists the client to gain more insight into how others can react to a specific part.

IFS as an internal relationship model allows the client to safely explore their attachment patterns in relationships and permanently heal the heavy burdens of attachment ruptures and developmental traumas. Integrating the Natural Lifemanship Model, specifically the Relationship Logic Principles, with Equine Engaged IFS furthers this transformative experience by giving clients the opportunity to work on their attachment styles in a real relationship with a sentient being: a horse.

The IFS model encourages curiosity about the client’s cognitions and beliefs, emotions and somatic experiences while attention is paid both to the past and the present. **Adopting curiosity** yields an openness from the heart and mind that melts away the impulses to analyze or interpret the client’s process. This condition allows for the transformative

benefits to spontaneously occur for the humans and horses as they consciously engage with each other.

Engagement between the human and horse is the goal. The term “**engagement**” means that there is an understanding or agreement to be intentional with another. The equine’s consent to engage with the client starts the process of **relational connection**. The Oxford Dictionary defines “**nexus**” to mean “a connection or series of connections linking to or more things” and “the central and most important point or place”. “**Equid**” implies any mammal related to the horse family, such as zebras, mules or donkeys. Equid-Nexus therefore, in the context of equine assisted (facilitated) psychotherapy (EAP), means important connections within a family, internally and externally. For the purposes of this writing, the terms horse and equines are used interchangeably.

The Equid-Nexus™ model maintains that **connection with others is more authentic and secure when originating from the Self**. This felt sense of Self-Energy links clients to their bodies and allows them to feel connection through somatic experiences. Relationships fostered through Self-Energy eliminate the patterns of re-enactments and transference as clients feel a sense of freedom to think, believe and act differently than previously conditioned. Through engagement with the horse, they have the opportunity to gain immediate feedback when connection is made through a part versus from Self.

There is a level of discernment here that is important to name. Since we all have parts, we relate to others from parts all the time. We need all of our parts and they can come in handy in interactions. For example, therapist parts hold the education and training, equine professional parts hold knowledge and understanding of horses. However, thoughts and behavior from parts in *extreme roles* can be problematic. Therefore, learning where reactions are coming from and becoming aware of unhealthy patterns driven by extreme parts is the golden ticket here. The process of increasing awareness and having enough space inside to make a choice of how to react is key. Automatic reactions from a part are therapeutic opportunities to get curious as to where this reaction comes from. Because “connection instead of perfection” is always the goal, the focus is on understanding the part(s)’ reaction and repairing attachment ruptures with clients and their horses. It also provides for more focused interventions.

The IFS model is currently a leading modality in the treatment of trauma. The following IFS Interventions Summary is provided as an overview of the main facilitation “steps”. However, it is important to underscore that these “steps” are not always linear in application. Facilitation is more of a relational flow. The model must be experientially practiced to be learned and integrated into a facilitator’s lexicon. Honestly, facilitating IFS is an art that requires the facilitator’s focused attention, presence, attunement, and resonance. The Equid-Nexus facilitation model provides the opportunity to embody courageous connection between horse and human in the spirit of healing relational trauma.

IFS Interventions Summary

While IFS is a model of permission and consent, it is also a parallel process. The IFS therapist/practitioner's main intervention is leading with Self-Energy and Self-Presence. That means that the facilitators must monitor their own internal systems while engaging in intersubjectivity with the client. This takes practice, patience and a willingness to engage in personal work in order to understand your own system. Getting acquainted with your own parts and understanding how they communicate with you will allow you become aware of being blended faster in sessions and in your own relationships. Some questions that are handy to ask yourself when you are noticing system activation are: "How am I feeling towards the client right now? How am I feeling towards the horse?". These questions will provide clues as to the parts that are present, giving you an opportunity to become aware, increase Self-Energy and Presence, and tell the parts that you will return to connect with them after session. Asking for a little more internal space from the parts will help un-blend and regulate your internal system.

The Equid-Nexus model has adapted the IFS facilitation steps to apply to the horse and human interaction. The flow of the model is as follows:

- Understand the context of the situation that client wants to work on.
 - Invite the client to discuss what are the main areas, problems, challenges, or memories they would like to work on. Notice what parts are present as client relays this information and what part is narrating.
 - Create a parts map if the client presents with a complex system.
 - Pay close attention to the relationship between parts, such as polarizations.
 - Assess for Self-Energy characteristics (8+C's).
- Introduce the model and establish a contract.
 - Explain to the client that you use a relational psychotherapy model. How much psychoeducation or information you provide can be a professional preference. Note that the more information may mean that manager part may be present. Ask yourself if you have an agenda in relaying any information. Trust the client's system and follow their lead.
 - Explain that the intention is to explore relational dynamics between the client and the horse, and that it is not task focused, but rather experiential. There is no right or wrong way to engage in this work.
 - Invite the client chose what they want to work on and contract with them that that will be the focus.
- Obtain permission from protectors to work on a target part.
 - Invite the client to connect with their internal system and notice what parts are present that are connected with the contracted focus.

- Use the 6F's to "find and focus" on the part(s), ask client how they "feel towards" the part, "flesh out" or fine-tune the understanding of the part, "befriend" the protector and "find out their fear" of what would happen if they didn't do their job(s).
- Heal the exile (or other target part).
 - Use the 6F's: Find, focus, flesh-out and feel towards the exile.
 - Make sure there is Self-Presence and a Self-to-part connection with the exile and build trust within the relationship.
 - Witness the exile's pain and extend Self-Energy to the exile.
 - Retrieve the exile if it is stuck in the past and it wants to leave.
 - Unburden the exile's pain.
- Integrate changes.
 - Invite positive qualities into the exile.
 - Extend appreciation to all parts.
 - Return to the protector(s) to inquire into the impact of the unburdening.
 - Unburden protectors if needed.
 - Ask what the protectors would like to do instead of their extreme roles.
- Completion.
 - This means a reconsolidation or recalibration of the system after the exiles and protectors are healed.

The 6F's (find, focus, feel toward, flesh out/fine-tune, befriend, and find the fear) are the interventions aimed at assisting the client to become aware of their own system. The main goal is to guide the client in creating Self-to-part relationship. The intention of IFS informed equine engaged psychotherapy is to build the client's awareness of their parts while they are consciously engaging with the horse.

The therapist/practitioner is focused on the client and the equine professional focuses on the horse, all while keeping a soft eye on the interaction of both. The team works together to build upon the communication between horse and human and uses the 6F's to facilitate this process. Attention is paid to the horse's reactions, including regulation, behavior and connection cues. The team "zooms out" to bring attention to the relational consciousness between the horse and the client. Helping the client to interact with the horse more from a Self-Led place versus parts that are in extreme roles is the intention. Connected engagement is always the goal. Clients are then better able to identify patterns in their attachment style(s) with an understanding of what "works" in relationships and what doesn't.

The client's Self-Presence is essential to have functional dual awareness of their parts and the horse. The Therapeutic Invention Process (TIP) Practice Sheets located at the back of the manual are intended to guide your practice in order to feel the flow and the rhythm of facilitating IFS informed EEP.

The Experience of SELF

As aforementioned, the Self can be conceptualized as our most genuine selves and/or part of the energy that connects everything in a universal way. The Self is not akin to Self-Actualization (Abraham Maslow), which might be viewed as an unattainable agenda to be “perfect”. Instead, the Self can be understood as an awareness of being “blended” with parts. For reference, blending means that the Self is in the background, perhaps idle, while parts are front and center. A metaphor that is commonly used to describe the Self and parts are the sun and the clouds. The sun is still present even on gray cloudy days, meaning that blended parts can obscure the Self, it is still there. Another metaphor is the night sky, with the Self as the moon and the constellation of stars as clusters of parts that are organized around something specific. In both metaphors, the Self and parts are present and coexist together.

Self does not mean the absence of parts, but again, the awareness of them. Therefore, we encourage our clients to speak for a part (from Self) rather than speaking from a part (the blended state). For example, if someone is experiencing anger and speaking from a part, they may say “I am so angry right now!”. Conversely, when speaking for a part, they may say “A part of me is really angry right now”, indicating an awareness that a part is holding the anger instead of their whole person being angry.

As an IFS informed facilitator, it is important to be able to identify Self characteristics in clients and in horses. These characteristics are the building blocks to healthy relationships within the system and with others. They can be resourced within the client to grow the “critical mass of Self”. Self-Energy builds and is not an “all or nothing” state as parts are always present. It is important that facilitators do not become Self-Seekers and have an “unblend agenda” (Bruce Hersey) for clients. The goal is not to get rid of parts, but to welcome them and understand what they want to share and why they do what they do. Furthermore, parts cannot be eliminated or “gotten rid of”. Any part that is a part of the person’s system is needed and important. After parts are unburdened they no longer have to hold on to their extreme roles. They get the choice to support the system in other ways by doing a different job.

Parts also have a semblance of Self since they are a piece of the whole being. Self-Energy is contagious in that the Self of one elicits the Self in another. In this frame, the Self is like a beacon of hope and connection for parts that have been exiled and protectors who are exhausted from their jobs. Self-Seeking can shame and confuse clients, especially those with extensive trauma histories. Being in Self can be considered a daily practice of connecting with parts and a foundational touchstone of aliveness and connection.

Since a main premise of Equid-Nexus is Self-Led facilitation, it warrants a more in-depth exploration of the experience of your Core Self. Richard Schwartz and Frank Anderson have

written about their own experiences of Self and underscore that it is different for everyone. I experience Self as an expansiveness in my chest, tingling sensation in my arms and hands, and vast openness and feeling of being connected to everything in my core. There is a lightness and buoyancy to my body and I feel clear and calm. The awareness and experience of Self can be a gradual process and for many it may be easier to recognize not being in Self and being parts-led. Being in Self can also be considered a spectrum, meaning that you could have access to Self but also be blended with parts. Again, awareness is key.

Working with your own system is a vital component of being a Self-Led facilitator.

One of the best ways to work with your internal system is by getting your own IFS therapist or practitioner and consultant.

Identifying your own parts in session is paramount to the success of your client and the horse, as “the horse doesn’t know who the client is” (NL principle).

Facilitating through your parts can actually block your client’s process and the horse’s reactions. Parts have their own viewpoints that may cause mis-attunement to the client. Knowing your system and being connected to your body is helpful to know when you have become blended. It is important to internally acknowledge your parts and ask them what they would like to share with you. Then, if it’s true for you, tell the parts “you get it” and express understanding and gratitude for the information. Let the part(s) know that you will get back to them after the session and gently ask them to soften back (or pull their energy out, dial the intensity down, or sit beside you). With more internal space you will be better able to re-attune to your client. If a part will not un-blend try to be curious as to why. Increase dual awareness of your part(s) and the context of the session. Ask yourself “how I am feeling towards the client? The horse? My teammate?”.

Having a trusted relationship with a teammate who can identify when your parts are activated is a good “checks and balances” system. It is a best practice to talk with your teammate about ways you can support one another if blending occurs. Building relational reciprocity within the facilitation team (including horses) provides a stable foundation and a courageous space for clients to do their work and explore themselves in relationships with another.

Since not all parts operate in extreme roles, some parts can be helpful when facilitating. It is important to have a good relationship with the parts that hold the skills as an equine or mental health professional. Knowledgeable parts assist in informing the facilitation process and working in tandem with Self (with Self speaking for the part instead of from it). The

distinction is that **parts have agendas and the Self does not**. Therefore, the information held by parts do not necessitate a certain outcome, but rather influences the energetic flow of intersubjective interventions.

For example, being trained in IFS, EMDR and equine-facilitated psychotherapy provides the knowledge and skills to treat individuals suffering from trauma. Knowing the client's and the horse's history and being in relationship with them also informs the clarity and understanding of the facilitator. Those experiences provide context and perspective of their unfolding relationship. In addition, establishing a collaborative treatment plan with the client and contracting to provide therapeutic services can employ many helpful internal system managers to cross the t's and dot the i's.

The encouragement is to have a relationship with parts and to work together to achieve inner harmony and balance, using all adaptive qualities to guide clients to connect and find what they need within their own internal system. The more you trust in the client's internal system and their own Self, the more you are facilitating in a Self-Led way.