

Exiles, Managers, & Firefighters

The **Internal Family Systems** (IFS) approach tends to look at client's presenting issues as being evidence of a part of them that is attempting to protect another part that is vulnerable. Because we have all been hurt and socialized in somewhat similar ways (*and I'm over generalizing here for the sake of keeping it simple*), our internal systems organize into similar patterns. The difference in how we operate is largely related to differences in the roles of the parts that dominate us. So, for example, if you tend to be shy, chances are that the part of you that discourages social risks is strong. Perhaps it tells you that you'll be rejected so why try? You may have another part of you that likes people and can be quite outgoing. In that polarization, the shy pessimist usually trumps. You may be the opposite however, leading with the personable part that generally overrides your pessimist, so you're considered an extrovert. From this perspective, any categorization of personality styles from the DSM to the Meyers-Briggs or others, is a description of the way people's parts have organized.

In the IFS map, the protected parts are called **exiles** because they are the vulnerable ones that we try to lock up in inner prisons or leave frozen in the past. Two kinds of parts protect exiles and also protect the system from them: **managers** and **firefighters**.

Think of times in your life when you felt embarrassed, grief-stricken, terrified, rejected, etc. What have you tried to do with those memories, sensations, and emotions? If you are like most people, you've tried to forget about them – to bury them deep in your mind. Think also about what others have told you to do about them. As Americans, most of us grew up in one of the most competitive cultures in the world. Living in it, we may have come to have a certain disdain for weakness and impatience with emotional pain. Most of us received some version of the message: "Just put it behind you – let it go" from well-meaning friends and family members. So we try to exile the fallout from the dreadful episodes in the past. But in doing that, we're not only exiling memories, sensations, and emotions; we're also exiling the parts of us that were most hurt by those events. These are often our most sensitive, innocent, open, and intimacy-seeking parts which contain qualities like playfulness, spontaneity, creativity, etc.

It's not just the traumatized parts of us that we exile. Think about what it was like to grow up in your family. What were the unspoken rules in your family about liveliness and spontaneity, anger, or assertiveness etc. What about your peers? How much were those relationships dominated by parts that wanted to look good to the outside world and needed you to conform to a certain image?

The irony is that once you start the exiling process, it reinforces itself. After they are locked away, those exiles can endanger your system or at least impair your ability to function. So you become even more committed to not going there and keeping them at bay.

Managers:

IFS calls the protective parts that are responsible for our day-to-day safety, the *managers*. For many of us, they are the voices we hear most often; to the point where we may believe we are those voices or thoughts. While we rely on their opinions, strategies, and judgments, we also feel constrained by or annoyed by them. Managers are the parts of you that want to control everything. They try to control your relationships and environment so you're never in a position to be humiliated, abandoned, rejected, attacked, or anything else unexpected and harmful. They try to control your appearance, performance, emotions, and thoughts for the same reason. In this protective effort, they often have a “never again” philosophy: “Never again will I let you be so weak, needy, dependent, open, trusting, happy, risk-taking, etc.”

Managers are the parts that monitor how you're coming across to others. They scan for cracks in your masks of invulnerability, friendliness, and perfection, and compare you to others. They interpret the world around you and create the narratives you live by and then enforce them. They create stories like, “I'm a nice person,” “I'm a hard worker,” etc. based on feedback from the outside world. So a habitually nice person exiles angry parts, a hard worker doesn't give time to playful or intimacy loving parts, etc.

Managers are the internalizers of our system – they open the door of our psyche and welcome in the values that surround us. They believe our survival depends on the mercy of the outside world, so they take on the voices of authority in order to get us to behave appropriately (for example, parents and cultural standards).

We often resent our managers because we experience them as the constant inner chatter that keeps us from concentrating, the self-hating voices that never let up, the fear that holds us back in relationships, the impulse to do for others that makes us neglect ourselves, the drive for achievement that consumes all our energy, the feeling of victimhood that others tire of, the sense of entitlement that makes us inconsiderate, and so on. Yet when we get to know them, we find that they are generally much younger than they first appear and are overburdened with responsibility and fear. Like parentified children, they are in over their heads and, consequently, have become rigid and punitive. They often feel unappreciated and hate their jobs but think somebody has to do it. IFS therapists have a great deal of compassion and respect for your managers and hope you can, too.

Some common manager roles include:

- Critics: taskmasters and approval seekers
- Pessimist
- Caregiver
- Victim
- Self-imitating part (most difficult to detect)
- Still others perhaps unique to each client

We often have a love-hate relationship with them much like we might with a dominating parent, boss, or spouse. To relate effectively to them, it's important to appreciate the responsibilities they carry, the constant stress they're under, and the sacrifices they've made to protect us. Misunderstanding the nature of parts has been one of the biggest sources of human suffering according to this model. This is why simply trying to rebel against them, ignore them, or try and use positive affirmations to correct irrational beliefs often isn't enough. When you get to know them, you find that in fact, most managers hate their roles and are much more than their roles. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1984) once counseled a younger client who was oppressed by critical self-doubt that if he stopped fighting it, "the day would come when instead of being a destroyer, it would be one of his best workers - perhaps the most intelligent of them all."

Firefighters:

As hard as our managers work to construct a protective fortress around us and to control us, our relationships, and events in the world, the world has a way of breaking through their defenses at times and triggering our exiles. For all of the reasons discussed earlier, this is a very threatening state. It can feel like the panic of a red alert in a nuclear reactor – as though we're about to have a meltdown. We all have parts of us that go into action to put out the fire, so IFS calls them firefighters. This might seem like an odd term for this group of parts because in some ways they are more like fire setters that create crises in our lives, however the term firefighters allows us to maintain a focus on the protective nature of even the destructive things they do. Firefighters do whatever it takes to deliver us out of the red-alert condition.

What's your first impulse when you begin to feel the desperate burning of hurt, emptiness, worthlessness, shame, rejection, loneliness, or fear? Which urge do you act upon to take away that fire in your belly? Which ones do you only fantasize? Many of us, in a compromise with our managers, binge on something socially acceptable – work, food, exercise, television, shopping, dieting, flirting, sleeping, prescription drugs, cigarettes, coffee, daydreams, meditating, gambling, or thrill-seeking activities – in an effort to distract from the flames until they burn themselves out or are doused.

When our effort doesn't work, our firefighters will resort to more drastic and less acceptable means, such as illegal drugs, alcohol, suicidal thoughts or behavior, rage and acts of domination, self-mutilation, compulsive sexual activity, stealing, or getting into punitive relationships. Many times, people resort to the second list immediately because their firefighters have found over the years that the first list doesn't do much to snuff the flames of emotion. Firefighters will use virtually any thought, activity, or substance if it works.

For some people, firefighters use the body. Sudden pains or illnesses can be effective distractions. Firefighters can amplify physical pain or disease that already exists, lower resistance to bacteria, or push psychological buttons that trigger genetic conditions. From this perspective, the dualistic notion that it's either in your head or biochemical uselessly dichotomizes a deeply interwoven relationship between body and mind. Our parts profoundly affect our physiology and vice versa. How we treat our bodies – what we ingest and how much we sleep, exercise, work, dance, get massaged, and meditate – strongly affects how calm or upset different parts are.

Another set of firefighters favors the impulsive retreat. If they sense impending rejection, they make us run or push the potential rejecter away. We're often unconscious of their work, aware only of an impulse to get away or lash out. These firefighters can make us want to suddenly bolt from a room in a threatening situation or get sleepy, confused, dizzy, or numb.

The image IFS paints of firefighters is that of a teenager who is responsible for an infant who's screaming, and nothing the teen does seems to help. The babysitter will try to stick something in the infant's mouth to calm it down (for example, food, drugs or alcohol), will desperately try to find someone else to take care of it (flirting or affairs), or will find a distraction for itself and everyone else until the infant stops crying (television, meditating, or shopping). If none of these efforts work, the frustrated adolescent is likely to throw the baby into a closet to drown out its wails and hope it will go to sleep. This image conveys the compassion IFS therapists and hopefully, eventually, clients will have for their firefighters. They have dreadful jobs and are often hated and attacked by your managers as well as by the people around you.

So your managers and firefighters are both trying to protect your system, but they do so in opposite ways. Managers are preemptive – they try to anticipate anything that might upset your exiles and try to control your environment to keep you safe. Most managers are also concerned about pleasing people. Firefighters are reactive – they frantically jump into action as soon as the exiles are upset and the fire starts.

Their urgency makes them impulsively unconcerned about the consequences. They often make you feel out of control, and they frequently displease people. They're the parts that make you fat, addicted, hostile, sneaky, insensitive, and compulsive. Managers often hate firefighters despite the fact that, just like managers, firefighters are trying to protect us – just in a different way. In turn, firefighters often rebel against the shame managers use on them by increasing the destructiveness of their activities.

It's very difficult for most people to believe that destructive impulses come from good parts in bad roles. For example, the many seemingly evil parts in sex-offenders, conduct disordered kids, and sexual abuse survivors – parts that say that they're the devil, want to kill others, molest children, randomly attack people, or recreate past abuse in their lives ALL have similar stories to tell. All of them are good parts in bad roles. Some are heroes, in an odd way. The reason they carried so much rage or sexual energy was because they had taken the bullet for the rest of the system when the person had been abused. Like Secret Service Agents jumping in front of the President to shield him from an assassin, they had sacrificed themselves and protected that individual by staying present for the abuse while other parts were allowed to check out. Consequently, they absorbed toxic amounts of the abuser's energy. That energy drove them to act in ways they themselves didn't like. Sex offenders often talk of exiled pain and shame they carry from childhood of abuse, neglect, and loss. Wordsworth said, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”

It's important to remember, however, that no matter how compassionately you treat your firefighters, they won't be able to change as long as there's a fire to be fought. In other words, until the exiles that they protect or distract you from are healed, your firefighters will still have the same old impulses. Also keep in mind that not all firefighters are as destructive or extreme as those discussed above. Some other common ones include parts that make us want to work more than we should, feel hungry for sugar or fat, and yearn for a mindless distraction. Because these firefighters are pervasive and normalized in our culture, we hardly notice their presence until we find ourselves in front of the computer, refrigerator, or TV. When you stop to think about it, a huge segment of the U.S. Economy is based on providing activities, substances, and goods designed to help our firefighters do their distracting and numbing. They help us avoid awareness of the pain in our country and in our selves.

No More Firefighters, Managers, and Exiles

So firefighters take us far away from our present-centered, embodied state of Self. The good news, however, is that once released from their extreme roles, firefighters often transform into our most lively, joyful, and resilient parts. They become passionately engaged in life and can be powerful motivators.

Think of what your life might be like if all the energy you spent, for example, angrily stewing about what others have done to you, or obsessively daydreaming about your missing soulmate, were available to you in the present moment and were channeled toward fully enjoying whatever you are doing now. What if the strength and urge to binge became a confidence and focus that helped you connect with people? As hard as it may be to believe, such transformations are possible because these parts are much more than the roles they have been forced into.

These three groups of parts' roles (exiles, managers, and firefighters) exist because of all the pain and shame you accrued in your life and the ways you were taught to relate to that pain and shame. Since you didn't know how to heal that pain and shame, you had to exile it, which led to the need for all these protectors. These three groups are polarized such that when one takes over, it tries to dominate your experience for fear that if it gives you access to other parts, you'll do or think something dangerous. When your internal system functions in this way, your experience of the world is impoverished. For example, many people dominated by managers live bland lives planning their safety. Those hijacked by firefighters have minds in constant agitation as they move from one distraction to another, never slowing down for fear of exiles catching up. Those whose exiles have taken over are constantly in acute and seemingly regressed states of fear, sadness, or shame. Anyone dominated by a single group exhibits a rigidity and narrowness because only a small, extreme portion of them is present.

As you access and use the innate healing resources of your Self, you gradually find that you no longer have managers, exiles, and firefighters. Not that your parts disappear – they just transform into roles they prefer. As that happens, you feel more integrated and solid, but with a wide range of emotion and expression. When life becomes stormy, you sense the deep peace of your Self that lies beneath the waves you are riding. You can be the “I” in the storm and, from that centered place, can calm your parts and the people around you. Because your parts no longer carry burdens of fear, shame, rage, despair, and so on, they get along with one another, trust the leadership of your Self, and are in the roles they enjoy. They become your allies and advisors, lending different perspectives and passions to your present-centered experience. In that state, things that used to trigger automatic responses in you lose their charge, and you can break lifelong patterns related to work, intimate relationships, your body, creativity, and more.

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