

## Ep #49: Internal Family Systems: An Overview



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**With Your Host**

**Kristi Angevine**

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## Ep #49: Internal Family Systems: An Overview

Welcome to episode 49. I'm Kristi Angevine, your host of the Habits on Purpose podcast. In this episode, we'll give you an overview of one of the most powerful paradigms when it comes to how the human mind works. Are you ready for something that's radically different? If so, let's dive in.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits that give more than they take. You'll get practical strategies for mindset shifts that will help you finally understand the root causes of why you think, feel, and act as you do. And now, here's your host, Physician and Master Certified Life Coach, Kristi Angevine.

Hello, hello, everyone. Happy New Year. If you're listening in real time, it is now 2023, and I find the shift to the new year to be such a fun time to reflect on where I've been, what's changed, and what I want to move towards. This time, two years ago, I moved from full-time clinical work to doing labor shifts, which is hospital-based OB-GYN work. And I moved from being a physician solely in private practice to being a business owner and entrepreneur, and a full-time life coach.

Being a physician was so amazing, and yet, life coaching is work that feels like home to me. I just truly cannot imagine not doing it. In one of these episodes coming up, I am going to share some of the most powerful lessons that I've personally learned, and how my life has changed from coaching. But when I thought back on what's been so instrumental for me in terms of ideas I've learned in the last year, hands down, learning about Internal Family Systems is it.

So what I'm going to do today is I'm going to give you a brief overview and a brief introduction to Internal Family Systems. Internal Family Systems is a model in psychotherapy that was discovered and created by Dick Schwartz. And of all the things I've learned, this model is the most clear and the most comprehensive thing that I've ever encountered. It describes how the human mind works in a way that gives clarity to what can feel like the most complicated and confusing aspects of our lived experience.

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It's a radically different paradigm for conceptually how the human mind functions, but through its lens, the most stubborn habits make sense, and the most stubborn habits are no longer these fixed, never to be changed hassles that we usually see them as. So the purpose of this episode is to give you a broad brushstrokes, broad overview, to whet your appetite to learn more about Internal Family Systems or IFS.

Now what I share here is not an idea that I came up with, and if you want to immerse yourself in learning more after you listen, the best place to start is the book *No Bad Parts* by the IFS founder Dick Schwartz. And there are also some really amazing podcast interviews with Dr. Schwartz, where he shares how he developed the model, how he empirically observed his patients, and then put together what he saw into this framework. And on these podcasts, he does these brief demonstrations with the podcast hosts that really illustrates how it looks to use this model. And in the show notes, I will link to a couple of these podcasts that I think are really good. So what is IFS? IFS is not only a model in psychotherapy, but it's also seen as a life practice that explains how the human mind works.

So in a nutshell, IFS views the human mind as a pluralistic system, it sees the mind quite literally working like the film *Inside Out*. So if you've seen this animated feature, you know exactly what I'm talking about. But if not, that's totally fine. From the Internal Family Systems standpoint, every single one of us has multiple personalities, and all of these personalities or parts of us play important roles in our system as a whole. Dick Schwartz starts his book, *No Bad Parts*, out with this quote.

He says, "We were all raised in what I'll call the mono-mind belief system. The idea that you have one mind out of which different thoughts, and emotions, and impulses, and urges emanate. That's the paradigm I believed in too until I kept encountering clients who taught me otherwise. Because the mono-mind view is so ubiquitous and assumed in our culture, we never really questioned the truth of it. I want to help you take a look at who you really are. I'm going to invite you to try on this different paradigm

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of multiplicity that IFS espouses, and consider the possibility that you and everyone else is a multiple personality, and that is a good thing."

He goes on to say, "I'm not suggesting that you have multiple personality disorder, now called dissociative identity disorder. But I do think that people with that diagnosis are not so different from everybody else. What are called alters in these people are the same as what I call parts in IFS, and they exist in all of us. The only difference is that people with dissociative identity disorder suffered horrible abuse and their system of parts got blown apart more than most. So each part stands out in bolder relief and is more polarized and disconnected from the others. In other words, all of us are born with many sub-minds that are constantly interacting inside of us.

This is, in general, what we call thinking. Because the parts are talking to each other and to you constantly about things you have to do. We're debating the best course of action, and so on. Remembering a time when you faced a dilemma, it's likely you heard one part saying, "Go for it," and another saying, "Don't you dare." Because we just considered that to be a matter of having conflicted thoughts, we don't pay attention to the inner players behind the debate. IFS helps you not only start to pay attention to them, but also become the active internal leader that your system of parts needs."

So let me give you an example to illustrate how this idea of multiplicity plays out in real life. So you're at the start of your day, you're focused, you're checking things off your to-do list like you're some productivity wizard, you are undistracted, you get tons done, little things don't bother you, you feel so productive, but then comes an unexpected curve ball, and now you're running behind by about an hour. The focus, even keel energy is gone, and it's like another person has taken you over. You see the world as overwhelming. There's too much to do in too little time. What used to be small challenges this morning are now enormous barriers. It's like you'll never be able to dig your way out of the dumpster fire of your never-ending to-do list.

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Then, someone you work with makes a little comment and you take it really personally, and your inner critic shows up saying, "What is your problem? I guess you just can't cut it," and now you're left ruminating and distracted. Despite needing to focus, another part of you is consumed with guilt for not doing as well as you think you should, and this part, it's the one receiving all the harsh commentary from the inner critic. But you still have to get through your day and do your tasks, so other parts that are good at putting their heads down, compartmentalizing, these parts come on board so that you can focus on your job.

During all this, you shoot a text to a friend and just vent, and your BFF usually replies quickly, but today, she doesn't reply at all. So a part of you wonders, "What's up? Is she mad? Oh, no. What did I do? Are we okay?" Then, you finish up your day and on your drive home, the other drivers around you are maddening, and a part of you wants to revoke all their licenses and institute a law that says that anyone who parks crookedly or doesn't put their grocery cart back should have mandatory miserable community service.

This part wants the worst for these other humans. Then you get home, and you walk in the door, and you get the biggest hugs from your kid, or your pet runs up to you and just is so excited to see you, and you are in that moment flooded with gratitude and presence. This grateful part of you sees how phenomenal it is that you have such amazing people in your life, and for a little bit, you feel peaceful and loving. Then out of the blue, that same kid has a meltdown. Say, a cat scratched her, and she can't find her stuffed animal, and she really wanted to have fish for dinner and not spaghetti, and she is just losing her mind.

In this moment, another part of you finds this infuriating and barks out something like, "It's not like the house is on fire and we have a real problem going on." Then when your kiddo gets more upset, your inner critic shows back up, "What kind of parent are you anyway?"

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Now cue the part who feels guilt and shame. "Oh, no. I'm a terrible parent." But to the rescue, comes another part that says, "We just need to calm down. Let's pour a glass of wine. Let's play some Candy Crush and find our inner calm." In this moment, that grateful part, nowhere to be seen. Then after doing some online shopping, grazing on Christmas cookies, and watching Netflix, you fall asleep only to wake up hearing that critic going on about all the time you wasted binging Yellowstone and how you'll never get control of your sweet tooth. Hearing the critic, it's like you're housing two people in one body, the ruthless critic, and then the person who feels the sting of the criticism.

It's an exhausting back and forth, and the next thing you know, it's like you've been taken over by another person who just wants to go back to Netflix, scrolling social media, shop, and eat those Christmas cookies. Does this sound familiar? It's not because you have multiple personality disorder or dissociative identity disorder. It's familiar because this pluralistic state is simply the natural state of how the human brain and human mind operate.

Instead of thinking of yourself as this unitary entity, you are in fact made up of an internal family, a community, an ecosystem of parts, if you will, that are different subpersonalities. The analogy that I really like is that your inner world, it's like a boardroom meeting filled with different people, each who represent different interests or different departments, and each of whom are at the controls at different moments in your life. So let me get back to what Dick Schwartz says.

He says, "While it may sound creepy or crazy at first to think of yourself as a multiple personality, I hope to convince you that it's actually quite empowering. It's only disturbing because multiplicity has been pathologized in our culture. A person with separate autonomous personalities is viewed as sick or damaged, and the existence of their alters is considered simply the product of trauma, the fragmentation of their previously unitary mind. From the mono-mind point of view, our natural condition is a unitary mind,

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unless of course trauma comes along and shatters it into pieces like shards of a vase."

He goes on to share, "The mono-mind paradigm has caused us to fear our parts and view them as pathological. In our attempts to control what we consider to be disturbing thoughts and emotions, we just end up fighting, ignoring, disciplining, hiding, or feeling ashamed of those impulses that keep us from doing what we want to do in our lives, and then we shame ourselves for not being able to control them. In other words, we hate what gets in our way. This approach makes sense if you view these inner obstacles as merely irrational thoughts or extreme emotions that come from your unitary mind. If you fear giving a presentation, for example, you might try to use willpower to override the fear or correct it with rational thoughts.

If the fear persists, you might escalate your attempts to control by criticizing yourself or being a coward. Numbing yourself into oblivion or meditating to climb above it, and when none of these approaches work, you wind up adapting your life to the fear, avoiding situations where you have to speak in public, feeling like a failure, and wondering what's wrong with you. To make matters worse, you go to a therapist who gives you a diagnosis for your one troubled mind. The diagnosis makes you feel defective. Your self-esteem drops, and your feelings of shame lead you to attempt to hide any flaws and present a perfect image to the world. Or maybe you just withdraw from relationships for fear that people will see behind your mask and will judge you for it. You identify with your weaknesses assuming that who you really are is defective, and that if other people saw the real you, they'd be repulsed."

So IFS posits that the natural state of our mind is a multiplicity. Another fundamental premise is that in this multiplicity, there are no bad parts. There are just parts that carry burdens of painful beliefs and painful emotions. In IFS, every part is seen as having a positive intent, but might carry burdens that come from having certain life experiences where parts of us took on beliefs that create feelings like worthlessness, unlovability, or

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being too much or too little. So in order to get through life to interact with other people, keep a job, order coffee, drive our car down the road, we can't be completely flooded with, for example, shame or worthlessness. So we compartmentalize these parts of us that carry these really painful burdens, and the analogy that's often used is that we send these parts away into the basement of our psyche so that we can safely navigate day-to-day life without being constantly triggered.

But just because these exiled or compartmentalized painful burdens are far below the surface, it doesn't mean that they can't be triggered. So in order to minimize the chance of this happening, we have parts of us that manage our life in a way to prevent being triggered, and we have other parts of us that respond to triggers in ways that are soothing even if they're not the most functional in our life. When you listen to the founder of Internal Family Systems, he quotes studies that he did as a family therapist on clients of his who struggled with eating disorders. His description of this is one that you hear often in many of his interviews, and I think put so well the relationship between our parts in a way that I think you'll find very helpful.

So this is what Dr. Schwartz says, "I started out like everybody else thinking the mind is unitary, and I trained as a family therapist for years. In fact, I have a PhD in the field. As family therapist, we didn't pay much attention to the mind at all. We thought therapists who mucked around in that inner world were wasting their time because we could change all the problems by simply changing external relationships. The only problem was the approach didn't work. I didn't outcome study with bulimic clients and discovered with alarm that they kept bingeing and purging, not realizing they'd been cured.

When I asked them why, they started talking about these different parts of them, and they talked about these parts as if they had a lot of autonomy, as if they could take over and make them do things they didn't want to do. At first, I was scared that I was looking at an outbreak of multiple personality

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disorder, but then I started listening inside myself and I was shocked to find that I had parts too.

In fact, some of mine were fairly extreme. So I started getting curious. I asked clients to describe their parts, which they were able to do in great detail. Not only that, but they depicted how these parts interacted with each other and had relationships. Some fought, some formed alliances, and some protected others. Over time, it dawned on me that I was learning about a kind of inner system not unlike the external families that I was working with, hence the name, Internal Family Systems. For example, clients would talk about an inner critic who when they made a mistake, attacked them mercilessly, that attack would trigger a part that felt totally bereft, lonely, empty, and worthless. Experiencing that worthless part was so distressing that almost to the rescue would come the binge that would take clients out of their body and turn them into an unfeeling eating machine.

Then the critic would attack them for the binge, which re-triggered the worthlessness, and they found themselves caught in these terrible circles for days on end." Thinking of this example from Dr. Schwartz's bulimic clients, notice how the part that binges, and the critical part have some positive intent. The binging part wants to keep the person from feeling worthless. The critical part doesn't want the person to be out of control and overeat. So every part has positive intent, even if it's not exactly clear what that positive intent is on first glance.

Now the last aspect of Internal Family Systems that's really critical to mention is this. What Dick Schwartz learned from his patients as they described parts was that they would sometimes describe something that wasn't quite a part like all the others. They described an aspect of themselves that was just them. When he would ask what part is that they would say, "Oh, it's not like all the other parts. It feels like me. It's just who I am."

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It appeared to him to be this core self. The essence of what makes you, you. So in the Internal Family Systems, this is called Self with a capital S. This seemingly esoteric idea of Self with a capital S is really not as new age as it might seem. Self with a capital S is characterized by the qualities of curiosity, compassion, clarity, perspective, gratitude, courage, confidence. And just like in a board meeting, when all the people attending the board meeting are quiet, and the leader or the chair of the meeting can speak, Self with a capital S is like the leader or the chair of that department.

When we look inside our system and we notice all the different parts of us, but we can get a little space from each of them. We no longer see the world through their eyes, and we can sometimes feel things like perspective, calm, compassion, clarity, and curiosity. This would be experiencing those qualities of self. In IFS, the Self with a capital S is always present, even if it's obscured, just like the sun can be in the sky, but be obscured by clouds on a rainy day.

So these qualities of compassion, curiosity, creativity, confidence, gratitude, they are always present in our system, but sometimes they're not easy to access or easy to see, and this is simply because we are aligned with or blended with one of the multiple parts in our system, and seeing the world through that part's eyes. So let's pause here. First of all, let's just take a moment to absorb the fact that this idea of a multiplicity is a radical departure from the mono-mind.

But think about all the different aspects of your personality. Perhaps you have a part of you that just loves to plan and organize. Perhaps you have a part of you that loves figuring things out and analyzing things very intellectual. Perhaps you have another part that likes to really tune out, bury itself in work, or food, or shopping, and maybe you also have parts that criticize you and tell you that you have to work harder, and that you're not good enough. You might notice that you have parts that absolutely adore your spouse, but you also have parts that get completely infuriated by that same spouse. Likewise, you might have parts that love being a parent to

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your kids, and other parts that deplore playing with those same kids. You might have parts that get really enraged, and you might have parts that think being serene and being calm is better.

You might have parts that minimize how difficult things have been, and you might have parts that feel really proud of your accomplishments. You might have parts that love to gossip, and love to vent, and love to complain, and blame, and you might also have parts that do the opposite. All of these parts, these subpersonalities if you will, they are the players behind your habits. These parts are why you repetitively think, and feel, and act as you do. And once you better understand the positive intent behind each of these parts, then you have a hugely deepened understanding of your habits, and this is the prerequisite for changing any habit.

So let's summarize all of this. First of all, it's totally normal if this idea feels a little bit crazy to you, embracing such a radical departure of the tried-and-true model of the unitary mono-mind. It does take time, but once you do and once you open to it, it's not something that you can actually unsee. So, IFS puts forth the idea that the natural state of the mind is made up of multiple parts and subpersonalities, that all of us have multiple personalities. What we call thinking is actually the interaction between these different parts. Instead of seeing conflicting thoughts and emotions as things to tame.

Getting to know these parts, just like you would get to know different people at a board meeting, helps you understand the intent behind each one. Every part in the system has positive intent, even if it's going about it in a way that seems misguided or that has consequences in your life that parts of you don't like. Just by virtue of being alive and having life experiences, parts get burdened. They get burdened with painful beliefs, painful emotions, and these burdens can put parts into extreme roles. When we see habits through this lens of a multiplicity, even the most frustrating patterns can make sense.

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Perfectionism is no longer a mindset that you need to get control of. Binging Netflix isn't a sign of poor self-discipline. Your inner critic is not something that you banish. From the multiplicity lens, your habits are simply the product of your parts resourcefully trying to fulfill some purpose. So once you understand why a part's doing what it's doing, you can start unburdening these parts so that they can shift into playing different roles in your system, roles that capitalize on their natural strengths.

So through a process of compassionate inquiry, inner critics can become cheerleaders. Parts of us that like to binge can transform into self-care advocates in charge of pleasure, rest, and play. Detail-oriented anxious perfectionistic parts turn into creative visionaries. So with that seed of hope, what I want you to do for this week is take some time to notice your different parts.

Instead of presuming that your conflicting thoughts and shifts in emotional states are problems that you need to fix or control, I invite you to envision them as distinct subpersonalities or sub-entities, or you can even personify them in your mind and see them as entities that you can get to know. I know some of you listening might feel like your brain is breaking a little bit, or this is stretching your mind a little bit past your natural limits, and I just want to encourage you that that's totally fine.

If this is stretching you in ways that feel uncomfortable, I know you can handle discomfort, and I promise you that the more you start noticing these parts, the more clarity you're going to start to get around your habits. So until next episode, Happy New Year, and take care everyone.

If you want to learn more about how to better understand your patterns, stop feeling reactionary, and get back into the proverbial driver's seat with your habits, you'll want to join my email list. Which, you can find linked in the show notes, or if you go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com), you'll find it right there.

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Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit [HabitsOnPurpose.com](http://HabitsOnPurpose.com). Tune in next week for another episode.