

# Ep #75: Using Internal Family Systems to Understand Your Habits



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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## Ep #75: Using Internal Family Systems to Understand Your Habits

Welcome to Episode #75. I'm your host, Kristi Angevine. And today, I'm discussing using Internal Family Systems to understand your habits. In this episode, I'll warm you up to the idea that you're made up of multiple personalities, or multiple parts, that interact internally, much like people interact in the external world. These parts are responsible for the bulk of all your habits. So, when you understand them better, you understand your habits better. Let's do this.

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. Life, for me, has been very full lately. Now, not necessarily in a bad way, but full in the sense that there's been a lot going on between activities with our kids, the end of the school year, both of our children getting sick one after the other, doing the juggle to balance work and childcare while they're sick, opening enrollment for my small group program, and quite a bit of travel.

I've honestly found myself having lots of big emotions. And as an introvert, I thrive on lots of solitude and lots of time with my inner circle of people. So, when it comes to all this travel, as much as I love traveling and speaking, it's absolutely essential that I make a concerted effort to replenish my cup when I get back.

Because when I don't, it's just this setup for all sorts of predictable patterns to unfold. Namely, I get really tense, I start becoming hyper focused on scheduling, and it comes out as being really controlling of the people around me. I basically start acting like I'm living in a pressure cooker, even though I'm not. So, huge apologies to my kids and husband.

With the most recent batch of curveballs, and life being life, and all sorts of things being really busy, this particular time, I just wasn't as easily able to

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recalibrate. Now, knowing that this is what I do when I'm tired, and when I haven't had much downtime, I've gotten so much better at anticipating it.

Doing my best to carve out time to reset, and to do little bits of micro-moments so that I don't get so harried and stressed and tense. But it's definitely a work in progress, that I'm figuring out as I go.

The difference between how I experience these busy times now, and how I experienced them in the past, is that now, I don't make myself wrong for what I'm feeling. In the past, I would overextend, get exhausted, feel super anxious, and thin skinned. I would wonder what my problem was, that I wasn't just more chill. And then, I would beat myself up for every teeny, tiny thing I did.

So, being even 25% kinder to myself is a total game changer. Sidenote, this is why self-compassion and kindness is such an integral part of what I teach my private and group clients. So many of us have this background hum of self-judgment that is just the norm. That we sometimes don't even notice. But once we do, and we can convert it to a warmer self-kindness and self-compassion, it opens the door to so much more ease.

If you're listening to this in real time, the next round of my small group coaching program starts in about a week. And we start with a two-hour welcome call on July 11, of 2023. As of this recording, there are still spots available. So, if you're a female physician and you want to learn more, you can go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP).

Now, one of the things that's helped me so much, is looking at my own internal workings through the lens of Internal Family Systems. When I did Episode 49, introducing Internal Family Systems, there was such a big response from listeners. So many of you were intrigued, had questions, and wanted to learn more.

So, you are in luck. I have found Internal Family Systems to be such a meaningful paradigm that I use it personally. And I use it in my coaching all the time. And, I'm going to be doing episodes about it in the future.

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Today, I'm going to discuss how the Internal Family Systems or IFS, for short, how the IFS model of the human mind can be used to better understand your habits. I'll do a short recap of what IFS is, and if you want a more in-depth discussion of this, you can check out Episode 49. We'll have that linked in the show notes for you.

And then, I'll show you how our habits can be explained as thoughts, feelings, and actions, that originate from distinct parts of us. And then, I'll end with a very concrete exercise that you can do this week, so that you can start noticing and naming your own parts.

So, what exactly is Internal Family Systems? Quick disclaimer, this is a very, very simplified description. We could spend months, if not years, studying this particular modality. But here's the 'in the nutshell' version. Internal Family Systems is a model in psychotherapy. It was founded by Dr. Dick Schwartz in the 80s.

It's now taken off like wildfire, such that therapists and coaches sometimes spend years on the waitlist for trainings, because it's so popular that the trainings have to be done by a lottery.

So, what began as an empirical observation from Dr. Schwartz, talking to his bulimic at clients who weren't getting better, despite implementing all the textbook family therapy interventions, is now a robust model with evidence-based, randomized, controlled, trial studies supporting it's efficacy. Not only in complex trauma therapy, anxiety, depression, panic, and mental and emotional wellbeing in general, but also in medical conditions like rheumatoid arthritis.

IFS views our mind as a complex system of different parts, or sub personalities. So, for example, today, you may have experienced a part of you that just wanted to stay in bed just a little bit longer and wanted to press snooze. And you might have another part of you that wanted to seize the day. And another part yet, that criticized that part who desired to press snooze.

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Most of us can relate to the idea of trying to make a decision, and having a part that wants to do one thing and another part that wants the opposite. When we understand the discrepant thoughts, beliefs, and feelings as originating from distinct parts of us, it provides a context where we aren't crazy or fractured just because we have so much variety internally.

IFS explains, all of our parts are distinct aspects of our system. And you can kind of think of a system as like an ecosystem. And each part in that ecosystem is just like a person. Each part has beliefs and thoughts and emotions and personality characteristics. What we call “thinking” is what IFS calls “interaction” between these different parts.

So, in your own system, when you step back and scan, you might notice that you have caretaking parts, accommodating people-pleasing parts, food and screen indulging parts that like to help you escape stress, planning parts, timekeeping parts, self-critical parts, or in my case, committees of self-critical parts, perfectionistic parts, control enthusiast parts, worrying catastrophizing parts, and rebellious ‘you can't tell me what to do’ kind of parts, just to name a few.

IFS sees all these different parts as developing the roles they have today, as a result of our life experiences. Where some parts carry burdens of extreme emotions or beliefs like shame, unworthiness, powerlessness. Beliefs like, “I'm not enough. I'm too much.” And other parts organize into protective roles.

Now, all these parts have positive intent, even if it's not totally obvious. And as such, there are no intrinsically bad parts. There are just parts that carry burdens, or in protective roles that aren't necessarily the role they would have chosen. Now, there's another essential tenant of IFS, and that's the concept of Self, with a capital S.

So, in addition to all these parts I was talking about, IFS posits that you have a core Self, or your seat of consciousness. Or the “you” that is not a part. They call this “Self”, with a capital S. So, your core Self is the you that embodies things like compassion, confidence, calm, curiosity, patience,

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clarity, playfulness, persistence, courage, creativity, connectedness, presence, and perspective.

Basically, there are parts and then there's Self. And the relationship between the different parts, and between Self and the parts, is the exploratory work that IFS therapists and coaches do.

In an IFS session, a coach or facilitator or therapist will guide individuals or groups through a process of exploring a part or parts; identifying them, learning about them, so that the parts can express their concerns, their fears, their core longings, or desires. And the goal of this, being to facilitate a Self to part, and part to Self relationship that's really harmonious and collaborative and fun.

Now, like I said, this is a very oversimplified description of what people immerse themselves in studying for years. So, on a future episode, I'll go into much more depth about the different categories of parts organize themselves into. Because these very categories nicely explain so many habits high achievers have.

But for today, we're going to stick to the high-level overview of explaining habits through the lens of parts. So, to do this, I want you to think of a play. Like a play that you'd go see at a theater. Now, the actors they've learned their lines.

And when the play goes as it's intended, every single time, the lines and the moves and the lights and the set changes they go in a certain sequence. They go just how they should, with one event cueing the next. One actor's line following another actor's line. One scene, after the one before.

Now, I want you to imagine that this play represents you and your life every day. The actors and the set team, they represent your different parts. Just like the actors in the set team are cued to do the same thing in response to a particular cue, parts of you have developed a well-rehearsed pattern of

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responses to cues, such that, when a circumstance arises, they automatically respond in a very predictable way.

These automatic responses are your habituated ways of being in the world. Your parts, just like actors in a play, they know their cues. They've executed their responses for years, if not decades. This is why, sometimes it feels like emotions happen to you and your habits have a life of their own. And explains why you might say things like, "It's just who I am. I'm just the kind of person who..."

So, let me give you an example. Say you're really tired, and you have a part of you that feels flooded with overwhelm and feels, frankly, quite powerless to feel any differently. When this part of you is triggered, just like when you strum a string on a guitar, this part activates other parts in your system. Almost like when a dog whistle blows and animals will show up, the activation of this part that feels overwhelmed and powerless invokes the presence of other parts.

Now, so that you don't get completely overcome with overwhelm, your planning, strategist, perfectionist part might show up and help you make to-do lists for yourself and for everyone around you, in an attempt to stop that original part from feeling so out of control.

Concurrently, a critical part might saunter onto the scene, to tell you how problematic you are, to shame you, to tell you, "You need to double down and suck it up, and stop complaining and stop whining. Because c'mon, you have a home and a job and food. Why are you so delicate when you get so tired?"

This example illustrates three parts getting activated and interacting in a specific way. So, when you go back to the example of the play, this will be a scene where one character is the haggard one, who's undone with overwhelm. And like clockwork, to the rescue, comes the overly controlling perfectionist actor with a very managerial vibe. And then minutes later, the critic character comes in with a scathing commentary.

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We might even imagine that there's another character or another part, that's indignant, that also joins this meeting. And is angry that work is so grueling, and there's not reasonable support from the employer or the family.

Can you see how these actors or parts could play a role in trying to maintain homeostasis in the system as a whole? To ensure the original part, with the overwhelm and powerlessness, isn't the only one dictating the experience?

So, let's connect all this to habits. The way I teach about habits is that habits are the seemingly automatic ways that we think, feel, and behave. IFS says that these automatic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors arise from parts that serve in response to specific circumstances in life, just like actors come onto the stage and say their lines at particular times.

When a part of us is present and at the driver's seat of our life, when we are fully blended with that particular part, that's when we're seeing the world through that part's eyes. And this explains why we can go from feeling wildly out of control one moment, and then rigidly clutching to a schedule the next.

A habit is simply the repetitive presence of a part that shows up. A part that's doing its very best to help us cope or adapt to a circumstance that threatens to flood us with intense feelings. That were they to go unchecked, could be tremendously destabilizing.

Another way to think about it is this example. A part that drives us to drown our feelings in pizza and whiskey and watching *Yellowstone*, might have the intent to douse the flames of despair and loneliness, so we don't get overcome by these other intense emotions. Even if that numbing behavior itself has undesirable consequences.

So, in this way, you can start conceptualizing how all your tendencies and habits could originate from a subpersonality, a part of you, that plays a



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particular role in your system. Now, your habits don't define you. There's simply thoughts and beliefs and responses that come from a part of you.

And the part of this that is so tremendously helpful, is the language of parts gives you a way to start framing your habits as 'parts of you', instead of being all of you. It sounds like, "A part of me feels really overwhelmed. A part of me is livid that I don't have more support. Another part of me loves making lists and plans. A critical part of me thinks I should have this figured out by now, and shouldn't complain so much. Another part, time travels to the future where I'm alone, living in a box, and no one loves me."

Naming habituated responses as "parts" helps you get perspective and space from these parts, so you can step into what IFS calls more "Self energy" or "embodying Self". And this is the state of being where you feel much calmer, you have curiosity, and you have compassion.

And when you tap into these qualities, that I mentioned before, that characterize Self energy or Self, you step into the space where clarity emerges. And then from that place, you can meet all your parts with this really warm, kind vibe.

In that way, you become the leader of your own system. Not from the vantage point of a part, but from this more grounded, centered place. It's like the difference between being in the play as an actor, unaware that you're actually playing a role, and stepping back, going to the audience and being able to observe the entire production.

So, I want to give you an exercise for how you can make all of this really practical, and how you can get to know your parts. The way you do this is you get out your phone, and you use the Voice Memo app. You give yourself one to two minutes, and you describe all your thoughts and feelings about a particular situation that's come up for you recently.

Or a decision that you're trying to make about which you feel conflicted or torn. Now, keep your recording limited to one or two minutes. You don't

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want to turn this into some dissertation that you really don't have time to go back and review.

After you talk into your phone, get yourself pen and paper or your laptop, play back what you spoke, and write down all the different parts that are here.

It could sound like this, "Part of me is so confused about what to do. Part of me just wants to leave. Part of me feels boxed in and cornered when they said that to me. This part wants to lash out. Another part feels like it doesn't matter at all. Another part wants to make it work out because this is what I've been doing for years, and it feels like it's the only mission I've ever had. Another part just wants to go watch TV and scroll on my phone. Another part hates that I can't figure things out."

Now, when you do this, you might notice that there are two parts. You might notice that there are 30 parts. Doesn't really matter how many you notice, you just want to notice the distinct tenor, voice, tone, of the different parts that are present for you.

Then, if you're a visual person, you can visualize each of these parts as people or objects or energies or colors, or whatever visualization works for you. When I do this, I often imagine there's a boardroom or a meeting room, where different representatives from the different departments are gathered. And so, I can kind of see them sitting there.

Once you do this, place these different parts sort of visually in front of you, almost like an audience of children at story time kind of sitting crisscross applesauce, just collected in one area. Then, see if you can tap into some curiosity, calm, or compassion towards all these different parts of you. Now, if you can't, that's totally fine. All that means is that you are looking at your part through the eyes of another part.

So, perhaps you have a part that sees all these parts, and is super frustrated with all these other jokers. It's like, "What are these people's problem? I can't believe I have all these parts. This is so dumb." This isn't a

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big deal. This just means you've identified another part that has showed up for you.

If you identify another part, and you have any trouble finding curiosity, calm, compassion, place that part in your mental audience as well. And see if you can get to curiosity, calm, or compassion. Once you're there, you just want to appreciate all these different parts from that space.

And this might sound way too simple, finding curiosity, calm, compassion, and then just noticing your parts. But I assure you, it's actually quite profound. Because it's so different than what we usually do, which is live through the eyes of each of these parts, or feel pulled between them.

Now, this kind of exercise can be so grounding because it reminds you of two things. Number one, it reminds you that you're not crazy for having conflict and discrepancies within yourself. You just have different parts that are surfacing. It makes so much sense. Each of them are all here for a good reason, even if you don't yet know what that is.

The second thing it reminds you of, is it reminds you that you are more than just your parts. When these parts or sub personalities are at the wheel, driving your thoughts, your feelings, your actions, it can really seem like that's the only available reality. But once you can notice and name and separate, or unblend from a part that's presenting, you can make some space and realize that this is just one of many ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

And what this kind of work opens up to us, is that over time, you, as the owner, operator, and sturdy leader of your own system, you get to kindly and warmly, with so much curiosity and compassion, interact with and even interview your parts. And ask them why they do what they do, what their concerns are, what their worries are.

You get to establish rapport inside your own system. And then, you get to go on and decide which of the parts you want to collaborate with for the different things that you do in your life. So, for example, you might not want

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the catastrophizing, Chicken Little part, but you might appreciate that part sharing with you the big, bad things that you should watch for so that you can prepare for them. So, this part might be allowed to make a brief cameo.

In this situation, you might prefer the part of you that's super creative to collaborate with the planning part of you, for execution of the project as a whole.

Or for another example, you might have a part of you that carries so much sympathy. And that might be really appropriate when you're with your patients, or with particular coworkers, but it might be highly inappropriate for that part to be the most present part when you're trying to advocate for change at this cutthroat business meeting.

The part of you that, say, micro analyzes people's tone of voice, their body language, their expressions, it might be great in one situation and horrible in another. And when you can get to this space, where you can decide which parts are going to collaborate, then you start getting access to so much choice. Basically, when you can name and notice and separate from your parts, you open the door to choice, which is where all of our power lies.

So, in summary, consider that the natural state of the human mind is to be comprised of multiple parts. It's not just one mind with a bunch of discrepant thoughts and feelings. It's a multiplicity. It's a complex ecosystem with all sorts of parts.

Now, this doesn't mean you have dissociative identity disorder, or what we used to call multiple personalities. It's essential that each of us have a non-pathologic form of multiple personalities. And that explains so nicely, why do we feel so much inner turmoil and conflicting aspects to our experience.

Next, our habits originate from the well-rehearsed patterns that the parts have fallen into. And finally, when we can start noticing and managing our different parts, just like we would point out different actors in a play, we can

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start getting perspective, clarity, and calm that helps us be so much more intentional.

So, I hope this little simplified view of Internal Family Systems, as it relates to habits, was intriguing to you. And I hope you love learning about IFS as much as I do. I will see you next week, in the next episode.

If you found this episode useful, and you want help applying these concepts in your real life, there are a couple of ways we can connect. Enrollment for the HOPP Small Group Coaching Program is open now. We start July 11, 2023, and we meet weekly for six months.

HOPP is an intimate group capped at 30 physicians, so that everybody gets individual attention. If you're ready for an evidence-based approach, to learn things that no one taught you about habit change, go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP).

Now, if you want to connect for private Internal Family Systems coaching in particular, there are two options. You can schedule a consultation appointment, so we can discuss the possibility of private coaching. That's at [HabitsOnPurpose.com/consult](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com/consult). Or if you just want a little taste test and want to experience a single IFS session, you can go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com/IFS](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com/IFS) to get all the information and sign up.

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