

The Basic Idea

You are not one thing. You are more like a crew.

Inside each of us live many different parts - inner voices, emotional states, and protective patterns that each have their own feelings, fears, and intentions. This is the foundation of Internal Family Systems (IFS), a therapeutic model developed by psychologist Richard Schwartz.

IFS says this multiplicity isn't a sign that something is wrong with you. It's how human beings are built. The goal isn't to get rid of your parts - it's to get to know them, understand what they're carrying, and bring them into a healthier relationship with each other.

And with the one who should be at the helm.

Meet the Captain: Your Self

At the heart of IFS is the concept of the Self - the calm, wise, compassionate core that exists in every person. The Self is not a part. It is you - your deepest nature, before the defences went up and the wounds came in.

You are the captain of a sailing vessel. The Self stands at the wheel - steady, skilled, reading the wind and the horizon. When the captain is at the helm, the boat moves with direction and purpose. The crew are capable in their roles: they haul lines, watch the weather, tend to the sails. They trust the captain. And the captain trusts them.

The Self is characterised by what Schwartz calls the **8 Cs**: Calmness, Curiosity, Clarity, Compassion, Confidence, Creativity, Courage, and Connectedness. When you are **in Self**, you can hold difficult emotions without being overwhelmed by them. You can listen to your parts without being hijacked by them.

The Crew: Your Parts

IFS identifies three broad kinds of parts:

Part	Role & Characteristics
Exiles	The wounded ones - carrying old pain, shame, grief, or fear, often from childhood. Locked away because their feelings felt too overwhelming to face.
Managers	The preventers - proactive, controlling parts that keep life organised and safe so the Exiles never get triggered. May appear as your inner critic, perfectionist, people-pleaser, or workaholic.
Firefighters	The reactors - rush in after an Exile is activated to put the fire out fast. May use numbing, rage, distraction, or avoidance. Their methods can be destructive, but their intention is always protection.

All parts - even the ones that cause problems - are trying to help. It's just that their strategy is out-dated.

When the Crew Takes Over: The Mutiny

Sometimes, the crew loses faith in the captain. Perhaps the ship has sailed through a terrible storm and the captain was afraid and went below deck for too long, overwhelmed. The sailors - frightened, well-meaning, but untrained for command - make a desperate decision. They seize the wheel. Worse, they drag the captain below and tie him in the hull. Now the crew sails the ship. And they are not equipped for it.

This often happens in childhood when we go through difficult experiences - being bullied, a parent leaving, or simply not having our needs met. Our managing parts step in to keep the child functioning.

This is what IFS calls **blending** - when a part takes over so completely that the Self gets pushed aside. You don't just *feel* anxious; you *become* the anxiety. You don't observe your rage; you *are* the rage. The part is driving, and it has no map.

The crew can keep the boat moving for a while. But without the captain's wisdom, the vessel drifts - or crashes.

This is not a character flaw. It's what parts do when they don't trust that the Self is present and capable. Often they took over because, at some point, they had to.

The Work: Returning the Captain to the Wheel

IFS therapy is the process of helping the Self return to leadership - not by defeating or silencing the parts, but by building trust with them.

The captain doesn't return by force. He returns by listening to the sailors - What were they afraid of? What have they been carrying alone? What do they need to finally stand down? Having been heard, the captain is given space and trust to take the wheel again.

What This Looks Like in Practice

In IFS-informed work, you might be invited to:

- Notice a feeling or reaction in your body
- Get curious about a part e.g. Anxiety ("What is this part afraid will happen?")
- Separate your observing Self from the activated part ("I notice a part of me that is anxious or furious...")
- Develop a relationship with a part, rather than fighting it

Over time, the Self becomes more accessible. The parts become less extreme. The ship finds its course.