

Toni Herbine-Blank

TYPES OF PROTECTORS

Welcome back everybody. I'm Toni Herbine-Blank. Now that you've had an amazing overview of the internal family systems model with Pam Krause, the next consecutive months we're going to dig in and give you more specifics about how to work with the model. This month I'm going to be talking to you about the protective system, understanding the protective system, how in this model of therapy we work to create safety, to work with Protectors, understand Protectors and develop relationship with Protectors. Some of that you heard from Pam last month and now we're going to be digging in deeper with me this month.

The first thing I want to say is that the human system is made up of many, many Parts, and not all of our Parts are wounded. I want to just make that clear right from the start because it is something that comes up in the trainings, which is, "are all human beings are just a mess until we start working with our Parts?" I want to reassure you all that not all of our Parts are wounded. However, when people enter therapy in general, and I think that Pam also stated this, they come in and they present with issues that are troubling them in their life. Often, as we start to listen to people speak about the issues that are troubling them in their life, and we start to hear and see and get to know what we would call "Protectors."

In other models of therapy we might use some terms to describe protection like defenses, adaptations, coping mechanisms, strategies, or even resistance. One thing I love about this model is that we try to take pejorative language out of our assessment of people and also to think of these things like defenses or adaptations or even resistance as something that is protecting the system and is essential for the system until it isn't anymore.

I am really thrilled to be talking about protective Parts this month because I love Protectors. When I teach this to students over a long period of time, what I say is, "Even though we want to eventually get to the vulnerability, we want to get to the Exiles, that the Parts in the Protective system have so much information for us. They have their own stories. They have their own timelines. They all have their own needs. As Pam said over and over again last month, developing a relationship with them is so important. That's what I'm going to be spending a lot of time talking with you today: "how do we create that relationship where they begin to trust the Self of the client, and to really believe that they're not alone, that they're honored and valued."

In IFS, we separate out the protective Parts into two categories. I'm going to talk about this briefly, although I don't want you to get hung up on trying to ongoingly differentiate between the two, because a Protector is a Protector and we work with them very similarly, although they do have some different strategies.

I want to talk to you a little bit about Managers, Manager Parts. These are the protective Parts that tend to be more proactive. They're forward thinking. They think about the future. They're planners. I have really strong Managers. I had in my early life some shame about the fact that I had a lot of controllers

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and a lot of Managers. I remember my Level One training, going into a great upset about a Part of myself that was striving to learn the model, and get it right, and be competent. I remember Dick Schwartz walking by while I was in this great state of upset about a Part of myself that I was getting to know. He just stood there and he said, "You know, that is such a great Part of you." I would say that that was one of the moments where I stood up and really took note of what we were doing here, because I really believed him, that a Part of me that I had dismissed, or diminished, or felt diminished by others, he was very genuinely saying, "This is a great Part of you." This was the beginning of my journey to get to know my Protector Parts and to learn to appreciate and love who they were in my system, as opposed to hate and try to get rid of them. So these are the Manager Parts.

The second category of protective Parts that we talk about or we teach about are called, "Firefighters." Firefighters are those protective Parts in the system that are more reactive. If you think about what an actual Firefighter does; an actual Firefighter in real life comes to the scene of an emergency. It comes when there's a fire. It doesn't really care about the art work on the walls, or the carpets, or the windows. A Firefighter just takes their ax, and they take their fire hose, and they rush into the emergency to put out the fire. You could just imagine that, that those kinds of Parts are the Parts that will deploy or begin to go into operation in the system when the management team isn't working so well. In a minute I'm going to discuss the difference between the two.

Most important, whether you're working with a Manager Part that's proactive, or you're working with the Firefighter Part that is reactive, both of these Parts are dedicated to protecting the system and they are dedicated to homeostasis. They are dedicated to keeping the balance in the system. Even though sometimes they might be at war with each other, and we'll be talking more about that later, all the Protectors, all the protective Parts that you notice are dedicated to keeping the system safe.

Just a little bit about the differences between Managers and Firefighters and how we begin to identify them. If you notice your slide you'll see two columns. On the left are Managers who are proactive, and on the right are Firefighters who are reactive. Managers keep Exiles or the vulnerable Parts in the system locked away for their own safety or for the safety of the system. I would actually say that all Protectors do that. Some protective Parts in the system will have a kind and loving relationship with an Exile and want to keep it exiled or tucked away for its own good, so that it doesn't get any more hurt than it already is. Some Protectors take on the role of protecting the system by being infected by the vulnerability of the Exiles. I hope that makes sense.

Just going back to Managers again, the Manager Parts often admit to being tired of their role, they carry burdens of fear and responsibility. When Pam was working with me, you might have noticed that one of the things that I heard inside is that, the Parts of me that I was focusing on, the Manager Parts, were really afraid of the unknown. They tend to take on a lot of great responsibility and want to maintain control in the system. They have a motto. Managers have a motto and they say, "Never again. I'm not going to let this happen to you ever again, so we are going to think ahead to make sure that bad things don't happen inside or out." The feelings of shame and humiliation are two feelings that Managers

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might say, “Never again,” about. “I am never going to put you in a situation where you feel that way again. I’m never going to let you be in a relationship with a person who makes you feel that way again.” They’re very dedicated to thinking about what might happen in the future and prevent that from happening.

Firefighters on the other hand, deploy when they feel like the Managers haven’t been able to keep the system safe. They are impulsive, they don’t really care about consequences, they claim that they like what they do. Although I don’t believe that that’s always true, because as I’ve worked with my own protective system and I’ve gotten to know my own Firefighters and the Firefighters of my clients for many, many years now, I do know that when you begin to get to know them and you begin to hear their stories, how they’re working tirelessly, endlessly, impulsively—and they appear not to care about consequences. But they can feel rejected, they can feel isolated, they can feel lonely, they can feel shamed. We often refer to them as heroes in the system because they take on the most undesirable roles, where nobody likes them on the inside, and nobody likes them on the outside. They’re often rejected internally by other Parts and they’re even more so rejected by the population at large.

I’m just going to talk a little bit about some common Manager roles, roles that Manager Parts take on, and you can see if any of these resonate with you or not. We have the Critics, the Controllers ... I can resonate with that one, I have some controlling Parts ... Caretakers, Parts of us that want to try to manage ... There’s that word again ... Try to manage other people so that the client can feel, or I can feel safe and secure inside, Analyzers, Worriers. You might even think, “Can you resonate with any of those Parts?” Just take a minute—you could even turn that video off if you felt like it. Just take a minute and think about who were the Parts in you that try to manage your life, who have taken on role to make sure that you are not feeling out of control, that you’re feeling prepared and ready, and that you’re not going to slip into a hole of shame or humiliation.

I have a very soft place in my heart for these Parts, and what I really believe is that I can’t, and you can’t, and we can’t function without these Parts. The problem is not with the Parts themselves. The problem becomes when these Parts are so overburdened with responsibility that they can’t stop what they’re doing, that we don’t have choices about how we want to react and respond in any given situation. These Parts are Parts that really deserve contact, connection, understanding and to be known and understood in a way that helps them begin to soften and relax.

I want to talk a little bit about the common roles of Firefighters. I believe the same thing about Firefighters, is that they’re working hard, that they’re misunderstood inside and out, that they’re highly burdened and full of their own shame, full of their own feelings, and working overtime to try to make sure that the system stays safe and in balance. Of course, there’s a term that we use, and I think that I learned this from a fellow trainer, Mike Elkin, who said that, “These Protector Parts, Managers and Firefighters, no matter how hard they work to try to protect the system, although it worked at one time when we were children, it no longer works in adulthood, and that Managers and Firefighters attract to them exactly what they’re hoping to avoid.”

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All of the hard work that they're trying to do to protect the system, particularly in relationship with other people, falls short. They can't do it, and if they can do it for a little while they can't do it all the time. It's a frustrating job and a job that, oftentimes, they feel like they can't let go of, because they don't have an alternative—or as Pam was talking about, the vulnerability that they're trying to keep at bay would just completely flood the system. It makes sense that they can't stop what they're doing.

Some of the roles that Firefighters take on are the addictive processes, over doing or under doing substances, chemicals, food, pornography, work. All of those roles are not necessarily Firefighter roles. What makes them Firefighter roles is that the person can't not do it, so it's something that happens reactively and impulsively, such as extreme acting out in anger, rage—an activated autonomic nervous system. Sometimes Protectors, Firefighters will take over in fight or flight, or shut down and freeze as a way to try to protect the system. They're often very polarized with Manager Parts. Again, I think I said, that we're going to be talking a lot more about that later, how these Parts can get into conflict with each other about what's the best way to handle the system.

I want to tell you just to finish this segment; I'm going to tell you a story about a war hero. This is a story that is tragic and was very moving to me when I read about it, but illustrates so clearly what happens, how our own Protectors take on fighting a war that has long been over. You'll see on the last slide a picture of a Japanese soldier. His name was Heroenato. He was sent to the Philippines during the Second World War, and was told that he was to remain on that island until he was given orders that the war was over. He was also given orders, clear orders that he was not to surrender nor was he to take his own life.

It's a long story, and a sad story, but he stayed on that island long after the war was over. In 1945 there was some attempt to try to find him. He was living in the jungle. There was some attempt to find him and to reassure him that the war was actually over. They dropped flyers, there were people that attempted to go in there and find him, and couldn't find him. He read the flyers but didn't believe it. I believe that it was in 1974 when he was actually found and reassured that the war was actually over. Even at that point he said that he wasn't going to leave the island until he was given specific orders to do so. So a high commanding officer from the Japanese army came and gave him those orders and reassured him that he could leave. You know, he lived on that island for thirty something years after the war was over, believing that the war was still going on.

The example of Heroenato is great one about what our own Protectors will do when they don't understand that the wars inside of us, or outside of us, are over, that the circumstances of our lives have changed dramatically, and that they no longer have to protect us in the same way. This is why we want to develop a relationship with them, to begin the reassurance, the appreciation and the negotiation with them to help them understand that the past is the past and the present is the present.