

Introduction to Systemic Work

Toni: Welcome to month seven everyone, I am Toni Herbine-Blank. I'm going to be talking to you this month about working systemically. For the first six months, Pam and Dick and I basically laid out the entire basic structure of working with individuals with IFS.

In this month we're going to start talking about working systemically, working with more than one part at a time. As you probably have noticed and probably have begun to experience, those of you that are very seasoned in IFS know this, and those of you that are new as you have begun to experiment working with your own parts or working with parts in your offices, you are stumbling into this idea that it's never just one part.

Being able to learn to work with more than one part at a time is very key in this model. Sometimes as you probably are aware, you have more than one manager with more than one concern, and so you're having to negotiate with several parts at one time trying to help them step back or unblend in order to be heard and understood. I want to start this month's segment by reading you a poem that illustrates this so perfectly, and it's called We Are Many by Pablo Neruda.

Of the many men who I am, whom we are,

I cannot settle on a single one.

They are lost to me under the cover of clothing

They have departed for another city.

When everything seems to be set

to show me off as a man of intelligence,

the fool I keep concealed in my person

takes over my talk and occupies my mouth.

On other occasions, I am dozing in the midst

of people of some distinction,

and when I summon my courageous self,

a coward completely unknown to me

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swaddles my poor skeleton
in a thousand tiny reservations.
When a stately home bursts into flames,
instead of the fireman I summon,
an arsonist bursts on the scene,
and he is I. There is nothing I can do.
What must I do to single out myself?
How can I put myself together?
All the books I read
lionize dazzling hero figures,
always brimming with self-assurance.
I die with envy of them;
and, in films where bullets fly on the wind,
I am left in envy of the cowboys,
left admiring even the horses.
But when I call upon my dashing being,
out comes the same old lazy self,
and so I never know just who I am,
nor how many I am, nor who we will be being.
I would like to be able to touch a bell
and call up my real self, the truly me,

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because if I really need my proper self,

I must not allow myself to disappear.

There we have it, we are more than one, and often times as is the basic assumption of this model, these parts are interacting among themselves. Just to reiterate what we already have told you, IFS recognizes multiplicity, in that it recognizes the systemic nature of the inner world and parts develop a complex set of interactions among themselves. You can see in this picture on this slide, same woman, two faces. Two feelings, two experiences.

In our experience, polarizations, parts that are in conflict are often the first to emerge when we start working with a client. When somebody just chooses a target part for example, and I think that many of the examples that you saw in the first six months with all three of us illustrated this. If I remember it correctly, when Pam was working with me, the first thing to emerge when I was sort of feeling into what I wanted to work with was another part that felt kind of irritated that we had to go there. That we'd name as a polarization. There's a target part, and then there's another part that emerges that has an opposing idea, why do we have to go there.

You probably are already starting to experience that. In the cases that I illustrated in month five, in both of those cases we had to work with a part that was unhappy with the target part. It can become very confusing for a new IFS therapist because often what happens is the system starts getting flooded and flooded with all different kinds of parts with their opinions. It is one way to throw the therapist off for sure, is to flood the system with all different opinions and needs.

I just want to say, start also here by saying that all different parts can become polarized in the system. Some ways that parts gets polarized are more complicated to work with than others. For instance, you can see in this slide that managers can get polarized. Two managers that have really good, solid ideas about what you or what the client should be doing can get polarized. Managers and firefighters really get polarized.

If you think about that, if you just imagine putting yourself on a diet, or you can imagine you're working with a client where they're using a substance or have an addiction, that there'll be another part in the system that really hates that part and will begin to put pressure. Managers and firefighters can get polarized, and even protectors can get polarized with the exiles that they protect or exiles that they are protecting the system from. There is no specific roadmap about who gets polarized, all kinds of parts can polarize with each

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other in the system.

Today I'm going to be talking to you very, very specifically in this month, I'm going to be talking to you about when managers get polarized and they are conflictual but they are complementary. In other words, if you have protector that's polarizing with a young child, that's not complementary, there's a power difference there. We're going to be talking about when you are working with two parts who really, really want you to listen to them and they're trying to influence you and the system.

Early in my career before I began working in IFS, I was working with young women with eating disorders. Even though I didn't have the parts language at that time I became very aware of the conflict in the system between the parts of these women that wanted to eat and binge, and the parts that wanted to restrict. In my own intuitive way, as we started to flesh this out, I began to hear very good reasons why eating was, or binging was helpful to the system. I would also hear on the other side of that why restricting food was helpful to the system, or so those parts believed.

When you begin to listen to both the restrictor and the eater, you start to make sense of their role in the system and what they're trying to do. When one would gain too much influence, for instance, when the bingers would take over and the system that the client would binge, and binge, and binge, at some point the restrictor would gain power and come up, and try to shut the binger down. That's an example, again, that's an example.

Another good example of conflictual but complementary is anytime that you are trying to make a decision. When there's a impulse in one direction, there will always be an impulse in the other direction. You can think about yes or no. I have over the years worked with many, many individuals who come in to my office in a part that has made a decision for example, to leave a relationship. Now, having IFS under my belt for so many years, what I know when that person comes in with that voice of "I have to get out of this relationship" that there are many other parts in the system that have perhaps a different opinion.

The idea of slowing down and starting to listen to the perspective of all these different parts is not to try to change the mind of the part that's presenting, for instance, I want to leave, but to help the client hear all of the parts about leaving a relationship. It's a powerful intervention with people so that they don't make a reactive decision out of one part.

I think that the best way is we keep saying over and over again for you to understand this is, we're just going to take a minute for you to feel into

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something inside of your own system, how you have opposing voices. We're just going to take a minute, and if you need a minute to turn off the video and get a piece of paper and a pencil, or maybe you already have that, I'm going to do this on this flip chart right in front of you.

Just take a minute and put two circles on a page. I'm going to invite you to just take a moment inside, to close your eyes if that feels comfortable, and think about the last time that you had to make a decision about something. Maybe it was even today when you were going to decide whether you're going to listen to this video or not, or what you were going to eat for breakfast or dinner depending on where you live in the world, or whether you were going to play or work today. Just see if you can feel into decision making process.

In the first circle, write the first part that you noticed. Often for me, I have to make a decision about whether I'm going to stay at my desk and get some work done, so that might be the first part that comes up for me in the morning. Am I going to go get all that work done at my desk? As I feel into it, and I want to encourage you guys to feel into it right now, do you begin to hear another voice? Just take a minute.

Write that voice down. For me, it's often, "Ride your horse." If you're following me and you've gotten two opposing voices here, mine is often work and play, and I think that for many of us in the workforce, that is a polarization that often comes up. If we just take a couple of minutes to feel into this, going to my office for instance and spending time doing some of the things that I need to do that will make my life easier is a really good strategy. On the other hand, going outside and being in nature and riding my horse is also a really good strategy for me.

As we go along in this month seven work, we're going to find out, we're going to explore more what happens when these two parts get into conflict. I'm going to stop here and I look forward to seeing you again in the next segment.