

The Internal Family in Nutritional Self Care:

an IFS Perspective on Healing with Food

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My perspective:
Eating Disorders and Feeding Dynamics

Where do we learn
how to eat?

How do we learn
to feed ourselves?

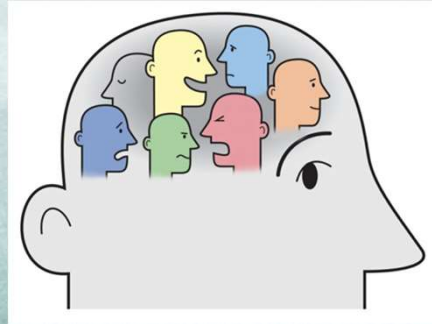
What can go wrong?



Photo by [August de Richelieu](#) from [Pexels](#)

Internal Family Systems

- developed by Richard Schwartz, early 1990s
- human experience can be better understood as a series of roles or “parts” that influence our choices, motivations, behaviors
- parts can function in healthy or unhealthy ways



Scope of Practice



Photo by [rangga ispraditya](#) from [Pexels](#)

The “Parts”

- Manager
 - keeps things tightly controlled
 - banishes the exile, keeps it out of sight
 - may be critical or harsh
- Exile
 - feels rejected, has big feelings
 - emotional intensity cannot be tolerated
- Firefighter
 - takes extreme measures to soothe breakthrough emotions
 - High risk behavior
 - can be reckless or numbing

The Self

...the core consciousness that can lead the parts and guide them to function in ways that support balance and wellbeing

“From birth this self has all the necessary qualities of good leadership, including compassion, perspective, curiosity, acceptance, and confidence...As a result, the Self makes the best inner leader and will engender balance and harmony inside if parts allow it to lead.”

–RC Schwartz,
Internal Family Systems Therapy, 2nd ed

“...Our parts are organized to protect the Self and and remove it from danger in the face of trauma at all costs. Protective parts wil report having pushed the Self out of the body for protective reasons. Once they do this, the inner system is on its own with the extreme feelings or thoughts we call burdens.”

—RC Schwartz,
Internal Family Systems Therapy, 2nd ed



Healthy vs. Extreme Parts Functioning

- When Self is present and leading, functional roles can be played
- Grabowski's alternative terms:
 - Manager as "Mentor"
 - Exile as "Kid"
 - Firefighter as "Advocate"
- When Self is absent, the parts over- or under-function, or become extreme

How the Parts *can* show up in Eating Disorders

- The Manager
 - Restrictive EDs, compulsive exercise, etc
- The Firefighter
 - Binge eating presentations
- Many will oscillate between the two, such as in restrict/binge cycling
- Goal is to keep the exile... in exile

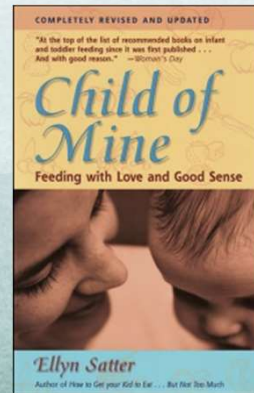
Family Feeding Dynamics

Ellyn Satter's
Division of Responsibility

Parents jobs (first):
What, Where, When

Child's jobs
(second, parents' jobs are done):
Whether and How much

All jobs are important, but must be
performed by the appropriate party.



Family Feeding Dynamics

Feeding struggles can often
be understood as either

- the parent trying to do the child's jobs,
- OR
- the child being allowed to do the
parents' jobs

Division of Responsibility for Adults

In a functional eating pattern,
consistent with Intuitive Eating,
the adult individual must play
both the parent's and the child's roles,
first doing the jobs of the **provider/parent**
to *anticipate* the needs of eating,
and then embodying the inner **child**
to engage in the present eating experience.

Division of Responsibility for Adults

1. Parent/Provider role

Primarily cognitive
Considers budget
Scheduling limitations
Gentle Nutrition
Anticipates needs
Plans, shops, preps
Honors preferences
Big picture perspective

2. Child role

Primarily embodied
Does this taste good?
How do I feel?
What do I want?
In the moment
perspective

Over- or Under-
functioning roles→

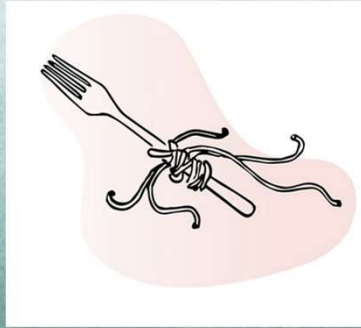
Dysfunction
Disordered Eating

Adult Feeding Dynamics and IFS?

The parent and child roles could be conceptualized as

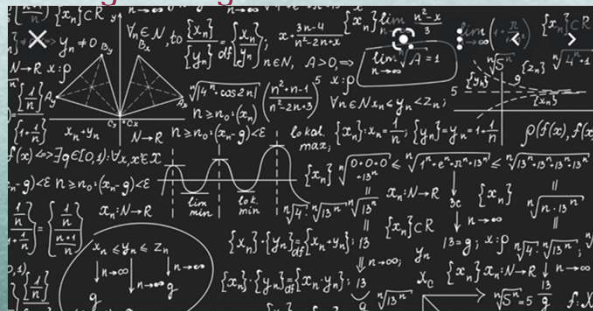
- parts of the IFS “self” OR
- as analogous to healthy expressions of the parts
 - Parent as Manager,
 - Child as either Exile or Firefighter
- Grabowski’s terms for healthy expressions:
 - Mentor (loving, providing parent),
 - Kid, Advocate (appropriately functioning child could be either)

Disordered/Dysfunctional Eating as Feeding Dynamics Imbalances



Parent over-functioning

- infringing on child's jobs of "whether" and "how much"
- anorexia, restricting patterns
- compulsive/compensatory exercise
- orthorexia, tightly controlled eating
- "perfect" eating is the goal



Parent under-functioning

- leaving child to fend for themselves
- chaotic, reactive “in the moment” eating
- subject to availability, consequence of poor planning
- lack of anticipation and preparation limits the ability to feed oneself well



Oscillation between extremes

- restrict binge cycle
- extreme restriction followed by extreme out of control eating
- remedied by allowing both roles to coexist and cooperate
- also an example of the IFS parts:
 - Exile: feels the feels, rejected, intense
 - Manager tries to tightly control eating to banish the exile
 - Firefighter comes in when the extreme restriction becomes too much, binge eating to urgently soothe discomfort

Interventions

- determine “who” is in charge, over-functioning
- if parent is over-functioning:
 - make the child (exile?) feel welcome
 - practice embodiment (trauma sensitive)
 - okay to practice flexibility, respond to the needs of the moment
- if child is too much in charge
 - build executive function skills, planning, preparation, etc
 - combination of anticipation and flexibility

Interventions

“Be your own
‘good enough’ parent.”

Parent doesn’t have to be perfect.

Child’s primary job is not to comply.

Thank you!

