



BOUNDARIES FOR YOUR SOUL:

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS MODEL

If you saw the Pixar® movie, *Inside Out*, you may have realized you were watching a tutorial of sorts about one of the fastest-growing, evidence-based models of therapy today: Internal Family Systems (IFS). For those who missed the movie, it explores the inner world of a girl named Riley whose life is disrupted by a cross-country move. Each of Riley's emotions, her anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and joy—personified by characters with the same names—competes to push its own agenda. As IFS therapists, we knew, even before leaving the theater, that we would be recommending *Inside Out* to clients for years to come to help them understand the power struggles that often rage within our souls.

Decades before *Inside Out*, psychologist, Dr. Richard C. Schwartz, noticed that his clients tended to talk about themselves in terms of “parts” (as in, “A part of me feels angry, but another part of me is so sad I could stay in bed all weekend”).

Alison Cook, Ph.D. and Kimberly Miller, M.Th., LMFT

Clients described these parts as having distinct thoughts, feelings, and character traits, like individual members of a family. Schwartz also noted that each part carried its own story—a narrative about its role in the client’s inner world. Based on these observations, Schwartz created IFS, thereby providing a helpful way to categorize the distinctive parts within the human soul, and offer a step-by-step approach to leading these parts into their most valuable states.

We have adapted Schwartz’s model, integrating key concepts from IFS with boundaries related principles (applied internally to thoughts and feelings) viewed through a Christian lens. *Boundaries for Your Soul* equips clients to lead the hurting parts of themselves into fellowship with God... because we believe that, ultimately, *the best way to care for the overwhelming parts of your soul involves inviting God’s Holy Spirit to be with them. This holistic framework is biblical, simple, and—best of all—it works!* Here’s an overview of how.

Three Parts of You

Just as you are created with specific physical traits, you are also created with three, distinct parts of your soul. These parts develop over time. When they are hurt, rejected, or traumatized, they can take on extreme thoughts and feelings, and painful memories can weigh them down. And then, they can cause you to behave in ways you wish you wouldn’t. The goal, however, is not to get rid of your soul’s distinctive parts—which would be impossible anyway—it is to help them heal, grow, and discover their God-given roles.

First, let’s look at protectors, the parts of your soul that work to keep you from pain. Think of your protectors as falling into one of two categories: managers or firefighters. Both work tirelessly, though in different ways, trying to protect you from the overwhelming feelings of the more vulnerable parts of your soul.

Managers

Managers are protectors that strive to keep you emotionally safe and prevent more vulnerable parts of you from experiencing harm. They drive you to perform, produce, protect, and please. Managers believe it is impractical for you to get bogged down

with emotional pain. Without healthy boundaries, you might be kept from experiencing emotional growth, deep-down joy, and genuine connection with others. Managers’ common activities are:

- worrying unnecessarily
- people-pleasing
- overworking
- overanalyzing
- excessively criticizing
- exerting extreme control
- pursuing perfection

Firefighters

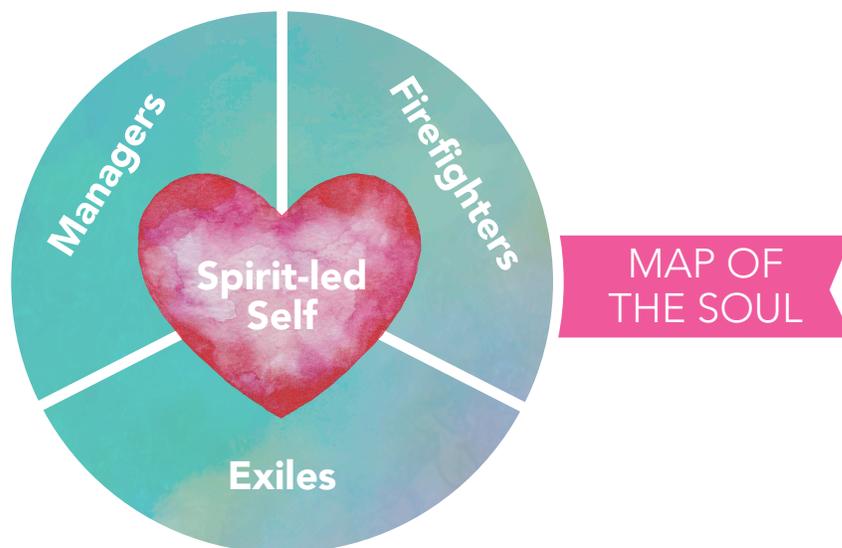
While managers try to act preemptively, firefighters try to extinguish pain *after* it occurs. These impulsive parts indulge in a lot of whatever feels good, distracting and tricking you into believing you are handling life well. If not kept within healthy boundary lines, they can lead you down a path of self-indulgence. Firefighter activities numb unwanted feelings. Here are just a few common ways:

- mindless Web surfing
- overeating, overspending, and oversleeping
- escaping into daydreaming, entertainment or romance novels
- addiction to sex, alcohol, gambling or drugs

Exiles

In addition to managers and firefighters, your soul has vulnerable exiles, so named because they have been banished or are in hiding. Exiles are the distressed parts that your managers and firefighters are trying to protect. Voiceless and long neglected, exiles are in a state of learned helplessness. Exiles have great need, and they have often yielded their power in counterproductive ways. If not befriended, exiles can cause a host of problems, including phobias or a victim mentality. The following feelings signal that an exile needs attention:

- insecurity
- hurt
- feeling unseen or unappreciated
- loneliness
- sadness
- fear
- shame



YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE OVERWHELMED BY YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS—YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO LEAD THEM AS THEY ARE GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD.

Your Spirit-led Self

In addition to these three types of parts, Dr. Schwartz identified what he called a “Self” and what we call in the believer, a “Spirit-led self.” The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “... When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13). The Holy Spirit guides and restores the fragmented parts of your soul.

Your Spirit-led self is you when you are being led by God’s Spirit, who abides within your soul. Many psychologists have explored this idea of what we are calling the Spirit-led self. For example, Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend refer to a “space inside” where you can experience your feelings without fear of judgment.

You know this experience because you feel calm, compassionate, and creative. From here, you can draw a troubling emotion in closer or ask it to step back so you can develop perspective. You can invite Jesus to be with the parts of you most in need of His presence. Your Spirit-led self can minister to your wounded, internal protectors and exiles so they are witnessed and transformed. *You do not have to be overwhelmed by your thoughts and feelings—you have the ability to lead them as they are guided by the Spirit of God.*

To help draw troubled thoughts and feelings closer—or gain more space from them, as needed—we suggest taking a “You-Turn.” This process involves looking within to bring overwhelming parts of the soul under the Spirit-led self’s leadership. It starts with following what we call the Five Steps:

- Step 1: Focus** on an overwhelming part of yourself.
- Step 2: Befriend** this part you do not like.
- Step 3: Invite** Jesus to draw near.
- Step 4: Unburden** this weary part.
- Step 5: Integrate** it into your internal family.

By following the Five Steps of a You-Turn, you will develop healthy internal boundaries. You will know what to do when you feel overwhelmed. You will learn how to welcome God into the troubled areas of your life, move from doubt and conflict to confidence and peace, and turn your most troubling thoughts and feelings into your greatest allies. The Five Steps offer a way to care for your internal family so you can discover wholeness and, as a result, peace, joy, and an abundant life. +

Editor’s Note: To help clients gain insight into the state of their internal boundaries, the authors have created a lighthearted quiz: <https://info.thomasnelson.com/p/boundaries-for-your-soul/>.



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