

Dangerous Firefighters by Marta Chausee, Judy Lauwasser and Dick Schwartz

Dangerous firefighters can intimidate both the client and the therapist. Using IFS techniques and maintaining Self-presence can keep the situation calm and lead to lasting positive change for the client. Hope is a powerful tool for change; if the therapist can insert hope into a completely discouraged system, all parts will pay rapt attention and the firefighter may be enlisted as co-therapist. The following abridged transcript of Dick Schwartz working with a suicidal client demonstrates a way to work via direct access with suicidal parts. Remember that when confronting very assertive parts, the scared parts of the therapist may be activated. The IFS model emphasizes that all parts have positive intentions; this premise can encourage the therapist to remain in Self while learning the motives and distorted perceptions fueling a firefighter's behaviors.

THERAPY SESSION

So, you are feeling like you want to kill yourself. Is that right?

Yes.

Would it be all right if I talked to the part that tells you to die?

O.K.

OK. Then, I'll begin to ask some questions. As I do that, I'd like you to just let that part come and speak through your mouth as though your part were here and your Self were sitting over there. So, you tell Bill to kill himself. Is that right?

You got that right.

Why do you do that?

Because I just hate him.

You hate him. Why do you hate him?

He's weak.

You hate him because he's weak. And what makes you think he's weak?

He never learns. He tries really hard all the time. Over and over. But he never gets anything right. No body cares about him. Then he gets upset. He whines and feels sorry for himself. He's a total wimp. He's disgusting.

And if he got it right, what would that be like?

Well, he's not going to get it right.

Yes. But if he did, how would it be different?

It's just impossible for me to believe that he could ever change and be a man. It's been a lifetime of being a sniveling little worm. He's a doormat.

OK. And the worst thing about him always being a doormat is . . .

He's disgusting to see. He makes me sick.

OK. He makes you sick. You can't stand to see how weak he is.

It nauseates me.

You want to stop this weakness, right?

Yes.

If there were a different way to help him out of this weakness, would you be interested?

There is no different way.

I understand why you would be pessimistic about that. After all, he's been doing the same thing for so long. Well, just pretend. If it were possible that we could do this other way of handling his weakness so that you didn't have to be in this role anymore, what would you like to do instead? If you could do anything you wanted?

What a joke.

Anything at all.

So, I'm just pretending this could work?

That's right.

I don't have to do this some of the time or all of the time?

Whatever feels right.

[Long pause.] I need a nap. Then, I want to paint.

So, I will try to organize this so that you can rest first and then you can paint.

It sounds too good to be true.

I understand but I believe we can do it.

How would you teach him to not be so damned weak?

We would find the parts that tend to bring in this weakness.

I hate them so much.

I can understand why you hate them. But if he can be with them and unload the things they carry . . .

They just have to go. If you can get rid of them, he would probably be okay.

I can understand why you'd want to get rid of them but that's not possible. What is possible is to get rid of the things they carry that make him act weak. To do that, I need your permission to go to them and try to help them unload that.

Well, how do I know that you aren't going to make him more upset and wimpy by trying to unload them. What guarantee do I have about this unloading stuff?

We'll organize it so that he can get close to them without being overwhelmed by their feelings.

Can I watch?

Yes, you can watch. If it ever seems too dangerous or scary to you, you can stop the process. We can talk about it.

Nothing scares me.

No. I can see that. I meant, if you think I'm doing something wrong or you don't like what I'm doing, you should stop me.

How do I do that? Just jump out and talk to you?

Yes, that's right. I will always listen to you and I will always respect your concerns.

I guess we could give it a try.

OK. I appreciate your willingness to go ahead.

TRAINING SESSION

Q. I see how Bill's suicidal part was handled. How do I work with a self-mutilating part or outwardly violent part?

A. Approach those parts in the same manner. Always reassure dangerous firefighters that you do not aim to get rid of them. Treat them with respect and appreciation; they have

only been trying to help. They are self-preserving. Even the suicidal parts, as you read in the transcript, have a positive intent for the system, trying to protect the client from misery. If dangerous firefighters think there is an effective alternative, they are often game to try that new way. They are filled with hopelessness. That is why the therapist must always be hopeful. The therapist says things like, "I know we can do this. I have lots of experience with this." When IFS therapists started working with parts, they thought they were as bad and scary as they seemed. Only in the course of witnessing them melt over and over, did they come to realize that they all have positive intent. Unfortunately, firefighters often are stuck in a past where they are getting the hell beat out of them literally and/or figuratively. They do not know of any other way to protect the client. Respect their struggle and bring hope to them in their despair and fatigue. Show them that there are other ways to be safe.

Q. How do I convince parts that are scared of allowing me to work with firefighters and exiles to let me proceed? What do I say to them?

A. If the therapist can just convince these wary parts to trust and stay out of it for a second, the therapist can then work with the firefighter or exile. Sometimes it helps to begin with the firefighter in a room with thick walls and no doors and with the Self outside the room. That way, the Self can talk to the part through the walls at first and the other parts feel safer. As they see that terrible things don't happen, they're okay letting the Self go into the room.

After a therapist has worked with a difficult part, it is important to go back and check with those parts who stepped back to allow the work. They appreciate the concern and follow up. There is an alternate approach for some clients. Many people have parts who have trusted in the past and been repeatedly betrayed and further abused. To those parts, the therapist can say, "Okay. I understand that you have good reasons not to trust me, but would you just give me a chance to show you what's possible for a second? A question like that from the Self of the therapist can make the scared parts sense the therapist's capability and intent. Sometimes, they also like to know that they don't have to go far away. They are not being banished. They can be invited to stay. The therapist can say to them, "Watch every move I make. You can interfere if you think I'm doing something wrong. You can stop everything. We can talk about it." Then, the therapist negotiates just as he or she would with a person who feels very protective. After working with an exiled part, the therapist can ask the manager or firefighter that stayed aside, "What was that like for you as you watched us work? Do you have more faith now that we can help this part that's really hurting?"

Q. When I am working with dangerous firefighters and the exiles they protect, I am often asking the exiles not to overwhelm the Self. Yet, doesn't the Self need to really feel the agony of the exile before the exile can heal?

A. It varies. While the need for total blending is rare, some parts do not feel completely understood and appreciated until the client has experienced or embodied what they have gone through. However, this is less common than what some psychotherapies have led

therapists to believe. There are parts who want their struggle to be felt to a certain degree. The Self does not have to feel it completely. The parts still have a sense of being understood. That is what is needed to begin unburdening them. The witnessing of the story in the way a part needs is the pivotal piece of work. Different parts need different kinds of witnessing and they will tell you what they need. When parts need the client to fully re-experience the story, it's often because there are other parts who are afraid to believe the story and will only be convinced if the emotions are felt.

Q. How can I handle someone when a threatening firefighter has taken them over?

A. Firefighters tend to elicit coercive managers, both in the client and in all the people that surround the client. The therapist's practice of maintaining Self-leadership in the face of extreme parts is difficult but growth producing and also calming for the part. If you can do this, you get tremendous respect from your own parts and those of the client. When the therapist stays in the Self, the Self of the other person is elicited. Parts that were puffed up in their positions tend to melt when met with compassion. But, to stay in Self in those situations, you have to work with the parts of you that panic in the face of anger, suicidality, or other firefighter activities. Staying in Self doesn't mean you will never hospitalize or medicate clients. No matter how Self-led you remain, there are factors you cannot control that can make working with firefighters dangerous enough to take measures to protect your client or others. Taking those measures doesn't have to disturb your relationship with your client if you can maintain Self-leadership through the process. You'll find, however, that the more Self-leadership you maintain, the less often you have to resort to those measures.

The therapist tries to understand why a firefighter is doing what it's doing, just as he or she would with any other part. Clients are often relieved and amazed while you have curious, matter-of-fact conversations with their firefighters about things that they think are disgusting or terrifying. To show firefighters this kind of respect, however, you have to absolutely believe that they don't like the roles they're in and want relief from them, no matter how much firefighters say they like what they're doing. The therapist asks:

"What's keeping you in this role? What are you afraid would happen if you left this role?"

The part might say, *"I like doing this. I like hurting her. I like the power inside."*

The therapist then asks, ***"What do you like about the power?"***

In this way, the therapist gets closer to the part's real motive.

It may answer, *"I like the power because then I can never get hurt. No one will ever hurt me."* Or, *"No one will ever hurt her. I can keep her safe somehow."*

The therapist should persist with questions like ***"What would be good about that?"*** until the part reveals its protective intention or its fear that some other part will take over.

Firefighters are usually constrained in their roles either by the need to protect other parts or a polarization with another part. But firefighters also carry burdens and are stuck in the past so they need to be healed. The problem is that they often won't submit to being healed until the exiles they protect are less vulnerable.

The next set of questions is:

"If there was a different way to help her feel safe/stronger/less dirty/valuable/etc. . . would you have to keep doing this?"

Often the part will answer, *"No, but I don't believe you can change that."*

A good response is, ***"If I could, though, would you be interested in leaving this role?"***

They answer, *"Yes."*

Then, ***"If it were possible, what kind of role would you prefer to have?"*** They usually answer quite quickly and explicitly and want something much more positive. Sometimes, it's just *"I want to rest. I want to take a vacation."*

Q. I have a teen client who acts out self-destructively. At the end of sessions with exiles, I take the time to predict some possible trouble in the following week. Is that a good idea or am I giving his firefighters ideas?

A. Almost always, but particularly when the therapist first meets exiles, those predictions are a good idea. They should not be hopelessly dark predictions. Suggestions like this:

"Be aware that there may be a backlash." or, ***"You may not want to keep your next appointment or you may be nervous about what we did. That's just the nature of systems and change."*** can be helpful. Those types of predictions at the end are always very useful.

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