

# CASE IN POINT

Leading the Care Coordination Team with Knowledge, News and Learning

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## MENTAL WELLNESS

### A New Model of Understanding the Self, for Improved Wellness and Control

BY MARGARET MOORE AND TERESA TREIGER, RN-BC, MA, CHCQM-CM, CCM

Perhaps you have encountered this phenomenon of the human mind: you notice an inner dialogue among your inner voices, who don't always agree on the best decision or the way forward, creating ambivalence or even a sense of "stuckness." When faced with the choice of an apple or a brownie, a self-regulating voice may remind you of your goals to be healthy and manage weight. Then another voice insists on the pleasure of the brownie to make this moment more pleasurable.

What if there was a better approach to leading one's inner team, to respect and appreciate all of the inner voices, and soothe the ones who are suffering so they don't sabotage your best intentions? This article features a self-coaching model based upon a just-published hypothesis titled: *Coaching the Multiplicity of Mind: A Strengths-based Model* (Moore, 2013).

The new model builds upon Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, developed by psychologist Richard Schwartz over the past 25 years. One of Schwartz's empirical discoveries is the concept of a central mindful "self" that is able to observe and accept our inner voices with acceptance and without judgment.

#### EXPLORING THE DEPTHS OF SELF

IFS therapists help people access the mindful self and invite their voices, called "parts," which are experiencing negative emotions to a mindful, meditation-like sit-down. The "parts" appear to manifest as a construct that psychologists call sub-personalities, each with distinct needs, agendas, emotions, narratives and perspectives.

The therapy session follows a winding trail

to uncover small or large traumas of the parts and then unpack their interesting and often surprising stories. The client sits compassionately with the suffering of the parts, and experiences a process designed to appreciate and accept, then heal and release the burdens of parts.

The new model proposes that a set of primary capacities, or sub-personalities, form a strengths-based structure of the inner family. Figure 1 lists a set of primary capacities. The two authors of this article, a coach (Coach Meg) and a case manager (Teri), explore an inner family dynamic as it relates to a case manager's self-care trajectory and applying the model of primary capacities.

**Coach Meg:** Teri, your inner family dynamic has changed dramatically over the past year as health moved to the top of your priority list and you transformed your health habits, losing 80 pounds slowly and steadily. What were the big shifts?

**Teri:** I realized first that I was living with an often-nasty inner critic, my standard-setter, which has always demanded a high bar in terms of accomplishments. While this voice served me well in my career, it routinely told me that "I was not good enough" when it came to my weight and health. This bruised my confidence, which worried constantly that I would never be successful in losing weight, or content with each moment along the journey. It would often give up, and allow deeply-wired impulses to hijack my behavior and reach for unhealthy foods to make me feel better. Then the standard-setter would beat up on my confidence for failing, rarely forgiving or cutting some slack, creating a vicious cycle of criticism, overeating, anger

and defeat. The voice of my body regulator, who knew what was optimal for my health, often was drowned out by the angry and defeated voices. It felt neglected and sad.

**Coach Meg:** That was a tough place to be, having three members of your inner team stuck in distress. What were some pivotal moments that allowed you to break out of the stuckness?

**Teri:** I was lost in this inner chaos, except while I was working, when my well-organized executive manager harnessed my creative to do good work. I used my work to escape from the chaos. The whisper of a wake-up came when you suggested that I read Dick Schwartz's book on his model of the internal family system. I first realized that I was not accessing my mindful "self" as an objective, nonjudgmental, and accepting observer, allowing me to appreciate both the good intentions and the frustration of each team member. I was then able to notice my standard-setter's inner criticism and its anger, and my confidence's yearning for a realistic standard and its feelings of defeat. I acknowledged and appreciated their intentions, and learned to give them self-compassion, often crossing both hands over my heart as I sat with their negative emotions, rather than ignoring them or trying to talk them out of their states. This was not easy.

**Coach Meg:** It never ceases to amaze me how compassionate nurses can be toward others, and how difficult it can be to empathize with one's own suffering, which is simply signaling unmet needs. We can then decode the messages of our negative emotions and take steps to meet unmet needs. What happened next?

Figure 1

**Proposed Primary Capacities That May Function as Sub-personalities**

Self (leader)	To listen, see the truth, integrate all capacities into a whole
Autonomy	To be free and independent, to do what one wants to do
Body Regulator	To get to balance, equilibrium, calm, and good health
Confidence	To be strong, competent, and confident
Creative	To be creative, spontaneous, and have fun
Executive Manager	To be organized, do things well, and figure things out
New Experience Seeker	To seek new experiences and change
Meaning-Maker	To connect the dots, see the big picture, and create harmony
Relational	To love and serve others
Standard-Setter	To set the bar, achieve goals, and get approval and recognition

*Teri:* I began to ask my standard-setter to lower the bar, which energized my confidence. If they regressed to the old pattern, I would show appreciation and compassion again, and ask them to step aside rather than hijack me. Then I could really tune into my body regulator, who was surprisingly clear on what choices to make about eating and exercise. It took many months of practice before I could readily lower the bar or set aside the old strife, and just be with my body’s needs for good nutrition, daily walks, and healthy sleep.

As my physical well-being improved, my adventurer was awakened and I began to be more curious about my journey, summoning an energetic sense of wonder about the possibilities ahead. Perhaps the biggest shift was tuning into my “spirit” part, what you call the meaning maker. It formed a bridge from my past mindset of struggle to a new one with more balance and equanimity. It taught me to accept myself more and more fully, using a biology metaphor: every cell is doing the best it can with the resources it has available. Basically I am simply at my best in every moment, all parts of me doing the best they can, even if that seems below my standard-setter’s standard. This is not a new idea of course; however embodying it has

been one of my life’s greatest lessons.

*Coach Meg:* It’s interesting how the true nature of the journey wasn’t about weight loss, but leading the inner team in a new way: listening, understanding and appreciating. As more unmet needs got met, you had access to more of your whole self, which added new resources and energy. Say more about that.

*Teri:* Like a jazz ensemble I became much more aware and conscious of all of my resources. For example, my autonomy is strong, which enabled me to be self-sufficient from a young age. It helped me find my own compass and not overrely on others’ opinions, which are plentiful when it comes to weight loss approaches. My relational is blessed with empathy skills; in fact, I recognized that I got lost in other people’s pain and neglected my own. I rely on my relational daily for self-forgiveness and self-compassion and it doesn’t let me down. I love my creative, and I’ve organized my work projects so that I can express my creativity most days, which is a joyful energy that recharges my batteries.

*Coach Meg:* You are beginning to experience and enjoy a new level of energy and harmony, a wonderful gift along with new physical health and strength. What are the themes of the next chapter of your story?

*Teri:* I journal several days a week, a kind of roll call of my inner team. They are my friends and teachers and they still often surprise me. Now that my confidence has a stronger belief in my abilities, my adventurer is urging me to take some bigger leaps in my professional life, which is exciting. My body regulator is getting more ambitious and I have started training for a walking race. My standard-setter and executive manager are still prone to push too hard. I can usually ease the tension by showing them gratitude and appreciation for all that they do, and suggesting that they could relax more as there are now other parts of me sharing the load. Perhaps the biggest discovery is that my weight loss journey is not really about losing weight, but becoming whole, healthy and happy. Now that’s cool. ☐



**Teresa Treiger** is a registered nurse case manager, educator, and writer with over 30 years of healthcare industry experience.

Teri writes on such topics as patient-centered medical home, health technology, transition of care, future trends in care management and maintains the Case Management World blog. Teri is founder of the Case Managing Ourselves Initiative. Contact: [treiger@ascentcaremanagement.com](mailto:treiger@ascentcaremanagement.com)



**Margaret Moore** is a biologist with an MBA and a 17-year veteran of the biotechnology industry. She founded the Wellcoaches School of Coaching in 2002.

Margaret is co-founder and co-director of the Institute of Coaching and co-director of the annual Coaching in Leadership & Healthcare conference offered by Harvard Medical School. She is co-author of the *Coaching Psychology Manual* and the Harvard Health Book *Organize Your Mind, Organize Your Life*. Contact: [margaret@wellcoaches.com](mailto:margaret@wellcoaches.com)