



Intentional Presence: Parts Overview #1

Understanding Parts and How They Affect Your Behavior

Rhonda Mattern

“Parts” are elements of our inner awareness that many psychologists consider essential to understand, and yet the average person knows little or nothing about them. Any time we say or do something that we later regret, a part of our reactive awareness is driving our actions. Learning to work skillfully with parts can help us to shift limiting behaviors, realize more of our potential, and live in greater alignment with our deepest values. This article will define parts, discuss two types of parts that significantly influence our behavior, and explore how unseen parts of ourselves can keep us stuck in limiting ruts.

We usually think of ourselves as just one “self,” and yet we’ve all experienced inner voices with different and sometimes conflicting viewpoints, for example:

- A part of you wants to tell a family member to stop criticizing you all the time, and another part doesn’t want to risk stirring up conflict
- A part of you is excited and hopeful about a goal you just set, and another part of you thinks it will never work
- A part of you thinks that you’re a bad person and feels undeserving of love and attention

Any time we say or do something that we later regret, a part of our reactive awareness is driving our actions.

We call these different inner voices or viewpoints **PARTS**¹. We see parts as separate **FIELDS OF AWARENESS** within us that allow us to experience multiple emotions, **NEEDS**, **DESIRES** and viewpoints at the same time.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle was one of the first observers of the **PSYCHE** to recognize parts; he called them “part-souls.” Modern-day psychologists call parts everything from sub-personalities to complexes to self-states and beyond. We chose the name “parts” because it’s simple and universal: people already use the phrase “a part of me” in their everyday speech to describe parts of their awareness with differing emotions, needs, desires, and viewpoints.

¹ Definitions for terms in **BLUE** throughout this article appear in the glossary at www.intentionalpresence.com.

Parts React to Our Experiences

Just as your body features a network of interacting organs, your inner **SELF** consists of a network of interacting energy fields that perform specialized functions. Parts are one such energy field within you; one of their functions is to react to your experiences with information to guide your responses to your experiences. Because reacting is one of their main functions, we call the specialized awareness that parts allow us to experience **REACTIVE AWARENESS**.

Different parts of our reactive awareness arise continually throughout the day, communicating information like emotions, needs, desires, memories, and beliefs in response to our experiences. The waves of inner information that parts communicate influence our behavior, and the qualities they develop—like courage, persistence, and drive—shape our character. Without the information parts communicate, we wouldn't know what we need or want, what we like and don't like, or what actions we want to take. Life would be dull and static without them.

DEFINITION **Parts (n.)**

Separate, recognizable **FIELDS OF AWARENESS** within the **SELF** that drive our actions and allow us to experience multiple viewpoints, emotions, needs, desires and reactions at the same time. We sometimes experience parts as “sub-personalities” with their own strong opinions and urges that temporarily take us over and drive us to say and do things that we don't consciously intend.

An Everyday Example of Parts

Most people pay little attention to the emotions, needs, desires, memories, and beliefs that parts bring to our awareness. But when we're stuck in repeating patterns of behavior, getting to know which parts of our reactive awareness are driving our actions is an important first step. Most action blocks and stubborn habits we struggle in vain to change persist because of our lack of skill in working with parts and the **INNER INFORMATION** they communicate.

Below is an example of several parts that “Jane” discovered as we explored a longstanding habit she wanted to change. Because Jane spent most of her time helping other people, she tended to ignore her own interests, needs, and dreams.

As Jane imagined herself over-helping and quietly observed her inner reactions, three parts of her reactive awareness quickly surfaced:

1. A part of Jane felt angry about not addressing her needs and desires, and wanted her to focus more on herself. This part criticized Jane relentlessly, saying things like “What's wrong with you? Focus on yourself for a change. Get your act together.”
2. Another part of Jane felt sad, ashamed and confused. This part wanted to figure out why Jane was over-helping others so she could break this self-

The Many Names for “Parts”

One reason the general public doesn't know more about parts is because psychologists haven't agreed on a standard name for them yet. Below are some of the many names for parts used by psychologists and spiritual teachings:

Circuits (Scientology)
Complexes (Jung, Hillman)
Echoes (Matrix Re-imprinting)
Ego (psychology/spiritual teachings)
Ego states (Transactional Analysis)
Energy patterns (Voice Dialogue)
Fragments (deRohan, Jane Roberts)
I-positions (Herman)
Implicit selves (Sensorimotor Therapy)
Lower self (spiritual teachings)
Parts (Inner Empathy, Intentional Presence, Internal Family Systems Therapy, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Jane Roberts, Satir)
Part-souls (Aristotle)
Partial selves (Inner Relationship Focusing)
Positions (Coherence Therapy)
Potentials (Mahrer)
Schemas (Schema Therapy)
Self-states (Eisman, Kohut)
Selves (William James, Pathwork, Polster, Voice Dialogue)
Spontaneous management behaviors - the child (Hakomi Therapy)
Sub-egos (deGros)
Sub-personalities (Psychosynthesis, Voice Dialogue)
Sub-selves (Eisman, Goertzel, O'Connor, Shapiro)
The inner child (Bradshaw, psychology, new age teachings)
The many “I”s (Gurdjieff)
The swarm of entities (Twitchell)
Wavicles (Goff)

defeating pattern. This part of Jane's awareness had driven her to spend years studying self-help books to try to get to the root of her problem.

3. Another part of Jane thought that focusing on herself was selfish, and viewed serving others as a more spiritual thing to do.

Action Parts

We call the three parts above that Jane initially experienced **ACTION PARTS**. These lively parts arise any time we try to decide which actions to take. The information action parts communicate—including emotions, needs, desires, and beliefs—is designed help us to make good decisions, act in ways that fulfill our needs and desires, and manifest as much of our unique potential as possible.

Action parts are easy to spot because they usually carry strong and sometimes conflicting opinions about what actions are appropriate in response to a given experience. Sometimes the action they push for is taking no action at all. Other times action parts get hopelessly mired in protective behaviors like repressing emotions, blaming others, or harsh criticism of self and others.

Action parts often arise in pairs or teams that take seemingly opposing sides. Any time you hear voices inside that are fighting with each other, upset, criticizing you, or wanting conflicting things, you're likely to be experiencing action parts. People speak about action parts when they say things like, “A part of me wants to leave my job, and another part of me thinks I should stay.” The old expression “I'm of two minds about the issue” is another common way of talking about action parts. When the psychologist Jung exclaimed, “I am the

tension of opposites!” he too was describing action parts.

Action parts are extremely creative forces that often move our lives forward without our conscious awareness, but their conflicting needs, beliefs and desires can also create **ACTION BLOCKS** in our lives. Learning to interact with action parts and listen to the information they communicate can help us to take actions that leave us feeling whole, and wholly satisfied—actions that feel good to every part of our being.

Core Parts

Action parts aren’t the only energy fields within our reactive awareness that drive our behavior; **CORE PARTS** also carry powerful emotions, needs, desires and beliefs that shape our daily actions. We call these fields of awareness “core” parts because they carry core beliefs about central or core elements of our lives: beliefs about ourselves, our relationships, human beings in general, life and the world at large. The name “core” parts is also apt because these parts feel as if they’re located deeper down in our awareness than action parts, in the core of our being.

Below are other names psychologists use for core parts that might help you to get a fuller picture of what they’re like:

Different Names for Core Parts		
Name	Method	Why the Name Fits
Exiles	Internal Family Systems Therapy	Because we tend to repress and ignore core parts, they often hide and don’t want to be seen, and feel cut off from other parts of our awareness.
Compromised partial-selves	Inner Relationship Focusing	Core parts often carry intense emotions and beliefs that leave us <i>compromised</i> —unable to function effectively in some areas of our life.
The child	Hakomi Therapy	We often sense core parts as younger parts of ourselves that feel frozen in the past. When they’re activated, our voices often get higher and our vocabulary becomes more simple and childlike.
Alienated parts	Irv Polster (a Gestalt therapist)	Core parts of ourselves often feel ashamed and alone, partly because we tend to judge their intense emotions and beliefs and push them away when they arise.

Unlike action parts, core parts seldom voice strong opinions about our present or future actions; instead, they seem more focused on—and stuck in—the past. Core parts often carry intense emotions, beliefs and memories from past experiences.

Their emotionally charged beliefs are powerful motivators of our present-day actions.

Beliefs that Core Parts Carry

The beliefs that core parts carry are often childlike and extreme. This isn't surprising, given that many such beliefs were formed in early childhood before our powers of reasoning were fully in place. Core beliefs tend to be black and white, reflecting the simplicity of a child's undeveloped mind.

You can often tell that a core part is activated by the kinds of things you're thinking or saying. As we mentioned earlier, core parts' beliefs define the core building blocks of our lives, including our identity, our relationships, and life in general:

Sample Beliefs of Core Parts
<p>Core beliefs about our identity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I'm a bad (flawed, unlovable, unworthy) person</i>• <i>I don't deserve to get what I need</i>• <i>I'm not worthy of peoples' time, attention, or love</i>• <i>Emotions are dangerous and negative</i>
<p>Core beliefs about people and relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>No one will ever love me (get me/understand me)</i>• <i>No one can give me what I need</i>• <i>If I let my real self show, people will make fun of me (hurt me, leave me)</i>• <i>Powerful people are dangerous and bad</i>
<p>Core beliefs about life and the world:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>My life will never change</i>• <i>There's nowhere I belong or fit in</i>• <i>The world is a horrible place and I don't want to be here</i>• <i>Life is nothing but pain and suffering</i>

The beliefs that core parts carry act like powerful hypnotic lenses that shape our daily experiences. For example, harboring the belief that "life is nothing but pain and suffering" can cause us to miss many moments of joy, peace, and fulfillment that arise in daily life. Similarly, when we're in the grips of a belief that people are too busy or overwhelmed to support us, we don't even try to cultivate relationships that will nourish and sustain us as we undergo the challenges that life inevitably brings.

The core beliefs we just reviewed are common among people raised in Western cultures. However, the same universal belief in two different individuals can arise from completely different personal experiences. For example, the belief “I’m a bad person” might arise from experiences with religious teachings, critical siblings, a rejecting friend, or even a casual statement that angry parents continually repeat like “you kids are driving me crazy.”

Multiple Parts—and Multiple Beliefs—Often Drive Unwanted Behavior

Action and core parts often form an intertwined, hypnotic chain of beliefs that drive our unwanted behavior. For example, in Jane’s case (the woman we discussed earlier who over-helped others), a small team of parts with simplistic, intense beliefs had silently shaped her behavior for decades:

Belief	Type of Belief	Type of Part	Experiences that Gave Rise to These Beliefs
<i>I’m a bad person</i>	A belief about identity	Core part	Jane’s parents were constantly angry during her childhood. Jane’s young, undeveloped mind concluded that their anger meant that she was a bad person.
<i>Constantly helping others will make people love me</i>	A belief about which action is best to take	Action part	The young Jane noticed that when she focused diligently on catering to her parents’ every need, they often became less mean and angry. This caused her to conclude: “If I help people, they’ll love me and see me as a good person.” In short, Jane formed a belief that she was only loveable, worthy, and good when she was helping.
<i>Tending to your own needs is selfish and egotistical</i>	A belief about which action is best to take	Action part	Jane’s early religious upbringing emphasized that serving others was spiritual. In doing this, it implied that focusing on your own needs and desires was “unspiritual.”

When Jane started studying intentional presence, she found one thing confusing: if she strongly believed that over-helping was bad for her, why did she keep doing it? Now she could see at least one reason for her puzzling behavior: the adult Jane knew that over-helping wasn’t good for her, but these younger parts of her *didn’t*.

Neuroscience and Beliefs

How is it possible that the adult Jane knew that over-helping wasn’t good for her, but younger parts of her didn’t? Why didn’t Jane’s adult insight affect the beliefs of this younger part of herself? In recent years, neuroscience has discovered that emotionally charged beliefs like those listed above reside in “compartments” in the *limbic* brain that are often isolated from our conscious awareness, which flows

through our *cortical* brain. For this reason, our adult insights often have little or no effect on our decades-old belief systems. Similarly, positive thinking, affirmations, visualization, and other such methods often don't reach our old belief systems either. Although these methods can help to build up new beliefs in new parts of our brain, they often leave old belief systems in other parts of our brain untouched, and subject to **ACTIVATION** during times of stress.

Changing beliefs stored in the limbic brain requires us to unlock the brain circuits carrying those beliefs and allow new experiences and information to flow in and revise them. The belief shifting skills that intentional presence offers are designed to support this sort of deep change. According to neuroscience research, this approach to shifting beliefs is capable of producing actual changes in the neural circuits of the brain.

In Jane's case, we repeatedly activated different parts of her carrying limiting beliefs so she could directly experience the thoughts, emotions, and memories that were holding her back. Once those parts were activated, we then provided her with experiences and information to support her limiting beliefs to shift. As we repeated this process over time, Jane noticed that she spontaneously began to do small things to create a better balance between helping herself and others. She shocked herself completely one weekend by staying home two days straight and getting some much-needed rest instead of running herself ragged helping friends and volunteering at church.

All the discipline and willpower in the world won't change a thing if unseen beliefs or inner conflicts are holding a limiting behavior in place.

You can try to discipline yourself to change, but all the willpower in the world won't change a thing if unseen beliefs or inner conflicts are holding a limiting behavior in place. As Jane's example illustrates, parts of her awareness that she had never examined—and, in fact, had routinely pushed away—held the key to changing her habit of over-helping.

Beliefs aren't the only cause of action blocks and stuck points in our lives, but they're one powerful motivator of our behavior. The reason behind many of our most unwanted and perplexing habits becomes clear once we see the underlying belief systems behind them.

The Unwelcome Consequences of Pushing Parts of Ourselves Away

Parts affect our behavior in another important way: if we ignore the emotions, needs and desires they're trying to communicate, the subconscious brain center that activates parts can literally cause parts to "take us over" and drive our actions. In this case, parts take over and drive unwanted actions in an attempt to meet needs of which we're not fully conscious. Any time we say or do something that we don't consciously intend—and anytime we do something *we don't want to do*—a part of

our reactive awareness has temporarily “taken over” in an attempt to meet an unseen need.

When our subconscious mind takes the lead, our conscious mind is forced to shift into the passenger seat. During such times, it’s nearly impossible to act with conscious intention. For this reason, learning to work skillfully with parts is helpful for anyone who wants to live in a more conscious, intentional, and fulfilling life.

Learning to Work Skillfully with Parts

Some people worry that connecting with parts of themselves carrying intense emotions, memories, and beliefs will be a painful, frightening or exhausting process—the equivalent of a spiritual root canal. Spiritually oriented psychologists have discovered many practices in recent years that completely transform the experience of inner exploration. Unfortunately, relatively few spiritual practitioners and psychologists know about these life-changing practices.

The skills we teach for working with parts offer an unexpected benefit: they help you to develop greater calm, compassion, non-judgment, kindness and humility.

Intentional presence offers a set of hands-on skills and practices that make self-exploration a gentle, energizing and enlightening process. The skills we teach for working with parts also provide an unexpected benefit: they help you to develop greater calm, compassion, non-judgment, kindness and humility. Regularly practicing these skills helps you to strengthen the areas of your brain that allow you to access these and other expansive qualities.

To work with Jane’s parts, we used skills from all four skill sets that intentional presence teaches:

1. **INNER EXPLORATION SKILLS** help you to identify different parts of your reactive awareness creating unwanted behaviors in your life, just as Jane did above.
2. **FRIENDSHIP AND SUPPORT SKILLS** help you to connect with different parts of yourself in a supportive way that brings inner harmony and alignment and greater self-love.
3. **ACTION SHIFTING SKILLS** help you to shift beliefs and inner conflicts that keep you stuck in limiting ruts, which in turn allows you to actualize more of your unique potential.
4. **CONSCIOUSNESS SHIFTING SKILLS** help you to access and strengthen qualities like calm, non-judgment, curiosity, compassion, and balanced perspective. These skills not only help you to remain calm, centered, and connected during self-exploration, but they also bring similar benefits in daily life.

While all of these skills are essential, our consciousness shifting skills form the heart and soul of intentional presence. These skills teach you how to intentionally shift into states of consciousness that are completely different from the intense reactivity of parts. When anchored in these calm, centered, and compassionate states, working with the intense energies of parts is a completely different experience.

Mindfulness and Presence:

Two Keys to Working Skillfully with Parts

We believe that every human being should learn to access two states of consciousness with qualities and functions that are separate from the reactive awareness of parts. We call these states **MINDFULNESS** and **PRESENCE**. Mindfulness is a state of consciousness characterized by the ability to observe yourself and others with calm, cool, detached non-judgment. Presence is a state that allows you to warmly and compassionately connect with, appreciate, and understand different parts of yourself, even those that you currently don't like. Building your brain's capacity to intentionally shift into these two states will help you to work with different parts of your reactive awareness in a calm, centered, comfortable and supportive way.

We believe that every human being should learn to access two states of consciousness with functions and qualities that are separate from the reactive awareness of parts. We call these states *mindfulness* and *presence*.

The name “intentional presence” refers to the ability to *intentionally* shift into *presence*. Developing this skill is an important step in helping conflicted and struggling parts of yourself to grow and evolve. Intentionally shifting into presence also helps you to remain more connected, balanced and compassionate with other people, even those that tend to push your buttons.

Parts Don't Cause Suffering, Limitation or Violence

As I developed my ability to shift into mindfulness and presence, I began seeing different parts of my reactive awareness in a completely different light. I used to see emotions and “the ego”—a name some people use for parts—as the source of my suffering. I labeled my emotions and ego as negative, unspiritual, and destructive forces, and waged a constant inner war to control them. My wildest dream was to eradicate them completely.

That, quite fortunately, *did not* happen. I say “fortunately” because as I mentioned earlier, without parts, we literally couldn't function: we wouldn't know what we want and don't want or what we like and don't like, we'd be incapable of making decisions, and we'd never feel motivated to do anything. Parts are the specialized energy fields within the whole of our consciousness that make all of these abilities possible.

As I got to know different parts of myself more intimately through my own **DIRECT EXPERIENCE**—instead of simply trusting things I had read or heard from others—I slowly began to realize that every scrap of my awareness was useful, natural and important to the whole of my consciousness. This viewpoint lies at the heart of intentional presence. We don't see emotions, the "ego," or any other part of our awareness (including parts and the information they carry) as the cause of our suffering. We see *our lack of knowledge and skill in working with different parts of our consciousness* as the cause of much of the suffering and limitation in our lives.

Intentional presence doesn't see emotions, the ego, or any other part of our awareness as the cause of our suffering. We see our lack of knowledge and skill in working with different parts of our consciousness as the cause of much needless suffering.

Ending the War with Yourself

One of my teachers used to say that to end the violence in the world, we must first end the war inside ourselves.² Learning to work more harmoniously with different parts of myself was a huge missing piece in my own education, and it's been one of the most rewarding and life-changing skills I've ever developed.

Now that I'm supporting and collaborating with different parts of myself instead of fighting with them and pushing them away, I'm more present, more authentic, and more at ease with myself and others. Instead of constantly deluging me with harsh judgments, my inner critic has learned to be a helpful

advisor and I'm learning to speak on behalf of my angry parts instead of drowning them in syrupy politeness. Most important, I'm better able to live in alignment with my spiritual values, and find it easier to see and appreciate my unique gifts and share them with others.

I hope you'll find getting to know different parts of yourself as enlivening, inspiring, and life changing as I have. I warmly invite you to read more articles in our "Parts Overview" series. They contain more information about parts, the fields of awareness within you that are separate from parts, and practices for shifting limiting patterns of behavior with greater joy, ease, and skill.

Try It For Yourself

If you'd like to experience different parts of your reactive awareness from a state of consciousness that's different from parts, you're welcome to try this exercise. Repeating the three steps below throughout the day can help to train your brain to shift out of reactive awareness into the calm, non-judgmental space of mindfulness:

1. The next time you notice a strong emotion arising, instead of saying, "I'm angry" or "I'm sad," try saying "a part of me is angry" or "a part of me is sad."

² Thanks to Eli Jaxon-Bear for this inspiring message.

2. Notice any changes in your body or your inner state that occur as you shift from saying, “I’m angry” to “a part of me is angry.” Observe the angry part of you with calm, clear non-judgment.
3. Take a moment to notice the awareness inside that’s observing your emotions. See if you can notice any qualities of this “observing awareness” that are different from the part of you that’s angry, sad, shameful, fearful, etc.

You can apply these same three steps to thoughts as well. For example, if you find yourself thinking, “I’m a total failure,” try thinking “a part of me thinks I’m a total failure,” and notice any inner changes that arise.

After completing the above steps, notice if your **OBSERVING AWARENESS** is taking up more space inside than your emotions, thoughts, and other reactions. If so, it’s likely that you’ve shifted into mindfulness, a state that will help you to work with different parts of your reactive awareness with calm, cool, detached non-judgment.

How to Learn More

For more information about how parts affect your attitudes and behavior, you’re welcome to read another article in our “Parts Overview” series:

⇒ [Parts Overview #2: The Information Parts Carry \(and Why It’s Important to Listen\)](#)

If you’d like to know when new articles or e-books on intentional presence become available, please join our mailing list. Another study option is to enroll in classes, learning partnerships, or private mentoring sessions in intentional presence. To access the above article, join our mailing list, or explore options for studying intentional presence further, please visit our website at www.intentionalpresence.com.