

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

What's Underneath

A Worksheet for Seeing the Parts Beneath Your Child's Eating Disorder

THE QUESTION

When you're watching your child refuse food, panic after a meal, or disappear behind rituals, it's easy to believe the eating disorder is what you're fighting. But underneath almost every behavior is something much more human.

What is really driving my child's eating disorder? Usually, it isn't stubbornness, vanity, or a bid for attention. One helpful way to understand what's happening is to imagine a system of protective parts inside your child, working overtime to protect against a pain that hasn't found any other language yet. This worksheet gives you a map of those parts, so the next hard moment at the table can start from curiosity instead of combat.

None of the parts you'll read about here are the enemy. Each one developed to protect something in your child — and understanding what, exactly, is often the difference between a battle at the table and a moment of real connection.

In the pages ahead:

- A map of the three parts driving your child's eating disorder — and what each one actually needs from you
- A short set of reframes you can use in the moment, at the table
- A guided practice to help you notice your own responses this week

From Stephanie Strick

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ONE

The Three Parts, One Protector System

Internal Family Systems (IFS) — the framework Dr. Richard Schwartz built largely from his work with eating disorder clients — describes the mind as made up of parts, each with a job. None of them are the enemy. Each one developed to protect something.

	The Manager	The Firefighter	The Exile
ITS JOB	Control enough variables that the overwhelming thing stays at bay	Extinguish unbearable feeling the instant it breaks through	Hold the original wound, usually silently, underneath everything else — often loneliness, shame, fear of not being enough
WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE AT YOUR TABLE	Rigid food rules, calorie counting, perfectionism, over-exercising, an urgent need to earn worth through control or achievement	A sudden escalation: a purge, a refusal, a ritual that tightens, a meltdown after a "mistake"	Withdrawal, shame, secrecy, a flat "I'm fine" that doesn't match what you're seeing
WHAT IT BELIEVES	"If I can control this, nothing else has to fall apart."	"This feeling has to stop right now, by any means necessary."	"I am not enough." "I don't deserve to take up space." "My worth depends on what I produce or how I look."
WHAT IT NEEDS FROM YOU	Not a battle for control, but a steady, calm presence that isn't afraid of it	Not panic that matches its urgency — a grounded reassurance that you're not going anywhere	Not fixing — to eventually feel safe enough to be seen

Note: a child's parts rarely show up one at a time. A manager can run the show for months and then hand it off to a firefighter in a single meal. That handoff is not a setback in your understanding — it's the system doing exactly what it was built to do.

TWO

Try This Instead

Next time you notice one of these parts at the table, try shifting the question in your own mind:

"Why is she doing this?"

TRY INSTEAD

"What is this behavior protecting?"

"He's being defiant."

TRY INSTEAD

"A part of him is scared, and this is the only language it has."

"I need to stop this right now."

TRY INSTEAD

"I can hold the expectation and stay curious about what's underneath it."

You still hold the expectation. The meal still has to happen. Curiosity is not the same as giving in — it's what lets you stay connected to your child while you hold the line against the disorder.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU USE THIS

- **An undernourished brain struggles to do this work.** If your child is medically or nutritionally unstable, restoring nourishment comes first. The brain needs enough fuel before this kind of reflection is even possible for them.
- **Awareness is often the last thing to arrive**, especially with restriction. Your child may not yet see how their managing parts are hurting them. That's expected, not a failure of this framework.
- **This is for you, the parent** — a way to better understand what's happening to your child underneath the behaviors. It's also to help shift your own interior stance. It is not a script for confronting your child with "your manager part is..." language.
- This resource is educational and supportive. It does not replace your child's clinical care team.

THREE

This Week's Practice

Think of one recent hard moment: a meal, a comment, a refusal that caught you off guard.

What did I actually see? (the behavior)

What might that behavior have been protecting? (manager, firefighter, or exile — take your best guess)

If this behavior could speak, what might it be afraid of?

What is one small way I could respond with curiosity next time, instead of bracing?

You don't have to get this right. You don't have to identify every part perfectly. Simply becoming more curious than afraid is already changing the relationship.

FOUR

The Part That Doesn't Change

Before there was an eating disorder, there was a son or a daughter — and that dignity has never changed.

Underneath every manager, every firefighter, every exile, your child is still there. Whole. Worthy. Not reducible to a behavior, a number, or a diagnosis. That worth was never earned, and this disorder cannot take it away.

"What would it change if you could see the fear instead of the refusal?"

If this worksheet gave language to something you've been seeing but couldn't quite name — that's exactly the point. Seeing beneath the behavior changes everything, for both of you.

WHEN THIS GETS HARD

If you've spent months — or years — walking on eggshells around meals, trying to stay calm while your own fear takes over, you're not alone. Parents need support too. Healing isn't just about understanding your child's parts. It's also about caring for yours.

If you'd like support putting any of this into practice — someone to walk alongside you in the actual hours between appointments, not just in a guide — I'd love to talk. You can book a free consultation at accompanymehealing.com/book-a-call. No pressure. Just a conversation about where you are.

Stephanie Strick is the founder of AccompanyMe and a Certified Mentor & Partner with the [CatholicPsychInstitute](#). She accompanies parents navigating disordered eating and exercise through daily mentorship rooted in psychological science, attachment theory, and a whole-person understanding of healing. She has walked this road herself.

This worksheet is for informational and supportive purposes only. It is not a replacement for clinical care.