

# The Relationship Dilemma

How can a son differ with his generous mother and still be a good son? How can a daughter feel pity for her father and respectfully disagree with him without feeling guilty? How can a wife set limits with her husband and still love him? How can a husband and wife be diametrically opposed on an issue and still find common ground? How can children succeed when their parents insist on it? How can a single parent “do something for herself” without feeling guilty for leaving her children?

Is the husband who withdraws and isolates always leaving because he doesn't care enough about his wife or could it be that he cares too much about her reactions? Is the wife who attempts to control her husband compelled to do so because she only wants her way or could she be so afraid of his impact in her life that she defends herself this way? Is it possible for an employee to disagree with an employer without being disloyal? These questions point to common relationship struggles that appear to make relationships very difficult and sometimes impossible.

Relationships involve being connected with, but separate from another. Connecting to another, while still keeping your own thoughts and opinions is relatively simple when two people are not “close.” But when two people are “close” or care about each other being separate, yet connected is anything but simple. While most emotionally conflicted relationships appear to need more “closeness,” in fact they need more separateness in order to allow for less emotional reactivity and more thinking. Relationships that appear to be distant and polarized are completely enmeshed not allowing separate thinking or responses. Reactions of one are immediately met with an equal and opposite reaction from the other. The inability to determine where I stop and where you start is the weakness in most relationships.

Efforts to maintain some measure of “self” are often met with sabotage in the mistaken belief that separateness leads to not caring. Overcoming disappointment, resentment, and hurt can only be achieved by a strong sense of self. The ability to be a separate thinking person in the emotional caldron of conflict or seduction is directly related to one's ability to be truly connected. At the same time, the ability to connect with another is directly related to the level of self maintained by a person. Three dynamics in a relationship: closeness, separateness and the feelings generated in everyday experience fosters two different approaches to connect.

The two approaches used to establish and maintain relationships are cooperation and compromise. A distinctly different set of relationship assumptions are at work in compromise and cooperation. A relationship based on compromise assumes fairness as the standard, leverage as the method of change and conceptualizes relationships as a zero sum game. Cooperation assumes justice as the standard, self-regulation as the method for change, and that the whole of the relationship is greater than the sum of the parts.

# Cooperation or Compromise

## Compromise

To bind by mutual agreement. To adjust or settle by mutual concessions. settlement of differences by arbitration or by consent reached by mutual concession

## Fairness is the Standard

Compromise assumes fairness is the standard for a relationship. This standard is understood by both persons and works based on owing and deserving. Balancing between what one owes and another deserves is supposed to keep the relationship stable.

If one person does “for” another then the recipient “owes” and the giver “deserves” as a result of the initial giving. Fairness equals what one “owes” and another “deserves.” This way of interacting is based on the mutual understanding that giving will result in obligation. The natural result of fairness is that a recipient feels **obligation** when he receives from another and **guilt** when he does not give as much as has been received. A giver develops **entitlement** when he believes he deserves more than is returned and **resentment** when giving is not reciprocated or appreciated.

This standard is foundational in relationships of compromise. Expecting a return because of giving may not occur initially, but when the recipient doesn’t reciprocate by behaving in a particular way, the result can be an unexpected emotional reaction and a sense of resentment that your effort wasn’t appreciated. Consequently the same process occurs in every area of the relationship with the same predictable result.

Mary can’t believe that John wants to spend time with his friends when she has done so much “for” him. She expects him to spend more time with her. She thinks *if he had done as much for me as I have done for him, I would want to spend more time with him, why doesn’t he want to spend more time with me?* Mary believes she deserves more of his time than he has given her. Eventually, her sense of entitlement grows into resentment.

John recognizes Mary’s frustration as her attempt at obligating him. Therefore he resists her and spends time with his friends waiting to see if she really accepts him as a person or is more interested in getting her way. He refuses to spend the time she wants because she will get what she wants at the expense of his self-respect. John resists Mary’s attempts at obligating him to spend time with her. Their relationship deteriorates into a cycle of obligation and entitlement, resentment and will-conflict.

## **Leverage as the method of change**

Fairness as the standard for a relationship may keep people together using leverage through obligation, yet it undermines their trust and confidence in each other. Leverage is using your relational advantage for your own benefit. It is based on a set of predetermined rules of interaction that are supposed to keep the relationship together. These rules of interaction are fair but only apply in one direction: toward the other person.

For example, a woman handles all the chores around the house and says to herself, I would love to come home to a clean house after a hard day at the office. Her husband doesn't care about a clean house as long as he has something to eat and a remote in his hand. She finds his behavior disgusting and can't understand why he doesn't appreciate her hard work around the house. She would appreciate it! Soon she comes to resent him and has developed an attitude of entitlement that is familiar, "You don't appreciate a thing I do for you." She forgets that he works 10 to 12 hours a day and just wants a little peace and quiet when he gets home. Her leverage is in how hard she works and how he is being selfish not to appreciate all she does. The more she does and the more she reminds him of it, the more leverage she exerts on him. Interestingly, he could say the same thing to her.

Most relationships begin to breakdown when a person believes his or her behavior will change another person. Giving that is designed to get another person to respond in a particular fashion is manipulation. Intentionally giving to get something from another leads the recipient to conclude the giver is manipulative and can not be trusted. Giving may not intentionally begin with the expectation that the other will change, but when the results are not what you expect, the resulting anger, frustration or disappointment is an indication of hidden expectations the giver may not have been aware of initially. As unintended as the reaction is on the part of the giver, the recipient receives the reaction of hurt and disappointment in the giver as if the giver intended to be manipulative. The emotional reaction of the giver sets the stage for the recipients mistrust and suspicion. As a result, their relationship remains immature and characterized more by anxiety and fear than trust and love.

Leverage can be managed by how you receive. If you receive freely from the person attempting to exert control or influence, then you do not allow the feeling of obligation to capture you. The other person may become angry and even enraged and will resort to any number of approaches to get what is expected from you. Selfish, self-absorbed or arrogant are a few of the derogatory terms used to guilt you into the fairness model of owing and deserving. Leaving the entitlement with the other person as his or her problem is essential to avoid leverage.

How can a recipient receive without the suspicion of being leveraged down the road? Is it possible to give without eventually feeling taken for granted? Is receiving freely possible?

As a giver blames a recipient for not giving in return, the “giver” unintentionally creates more suspicion and mistrust. Soon the recipient refuses anything from his or her partner in anticipation that blame will occur down the road. Either sense of owing or deserving is equally destructive to a healthy relationship. Exerting leverage undermines trust in a relationship.

John feels obligated to Mary because of all she does for him. Eventually, John does not allow Mary to do anything for him as the price is too high. She tries harder to please him blinded by her need for John to spend time with her. John distances himself ever more from Mary. The harder she tries to bring them together the further apart they are.

She comes to believe John just does not love her and that he has the problem. Mary can not understand how her approach could be the problem. She does not understand how her “goodness” could result in emotional distance and indifference.

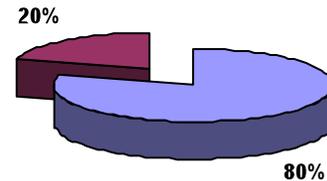
John does not trust Mary’s motives. He thinks she is more interested in getting what she wants than accepting him. Her disappointment, frustration and resentment indicate he is right. The more she works to convince him of her acceptance, love and concern the more he believes she is attempting to change, manipulate, obligate and leverage him for her own purposes.

Mary wants John to accept her too. His distance and withdrawal communicate to Mary that she needs to try harder. She tries harder only to be disappointed again and again. She develops an attitude of entitlement believing she deserves far more attention and appreciation than she has received from John. Her best efforts result in more distance and heartache.

Is there another way? Her second approach is to leave him alone. She determines he is not going to reciprocate her concern and therefore she “goes on strike.” She discontinues her efforts at keeping the relationship together and leaves him alone. Meanwhile John sees this as another effort to shape him into her image rather than love and accept him for him. This approach fails as Mary is as focused on what he is doing or not doing as she is in trying to do for him. John resists her effort at leaving him alone by outlasting her. Again, their relationship deteriorates into mistrust and resentment. Mary does not know what to do or where to go.

Compromise is an attempt at getting one’s needs met in a relationship by assuming if I do this “for” you, then you will do that “for” me. This process deteriorates into score keeping, anger and blame with both persons in the relationship believing they have done more than the other. The fear that your partner won’t ultimately take the initiative to give you what you want dominates the relationship promoting more leverage. The cycle of more leverage that results in getting less from the relationship is driven by the assumption that relationships are formatted as a zero-sum game.

## Zero sum game



A zero-sum game is a game in which one player's gain (or loss) equals the other player's losses (or gains). Adding the total gains of one person and subtracting the total losses of another will come to zero. Cutting a cake is zero- or constant-sum because taking a larger piece for you reduces the amount of cake available for others.

Compromise approaches relationships as if each person has a percentage of the blame and responsibility for their interaction. John thinks he is twenty percent of the problem while his wife is eighty percent of the problem. This simplified approach assumes that the one doing more “good” in the relationship has less responsibility for the problems, while the partner doing “less” in the relationship has more responsibility for the problems in the relationship.

As indicated earlier, more “goodness” or leverage is not necessarily good for the relationship. In fact, doing more “for” another when those efforts are intended to change the other person indicates the giver may be setting the relationship up for failure.

Zero-sum assumes that in a relationship each participant’s responsibility is only fifty percent. Why does being in a relationship mean you are only half as responsible for yourself as when you are single? Does being in a relationship mean that I assume half of the responsibility for my partner and I give up half of my responsibility for myself? Clearly, two people continue to be fully responsible for themselves. Using compromise to connect appears to result in less responsibility for both individuals in a relationship.

Zero-sum game assumes the only two forces in the relationship come from the two people in the relationship. But obviously other factors contribute to the interaction of these two people: family, friends, co-workers, and circumstances beyond anyone’s control. What happens when both people believe they are only twenty percent of the problem and their partner is eighty percent of the problem? Both may be right just in different areas of the relationship. John may believe he is doing eighty percent of the functional duties in the relationship, while Mary may believe she is doing eighty percent of the emotional connecting in the relationship. Both may be right in their respective areas but wrong when it comes to the other person.

After exhausting their efforts at compromise based on fairness, attempting to will shape and move each other through leverage, John and Mary don’t know what else to do. Fortunately there is another way!

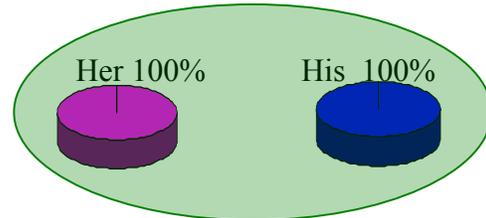
Cooperation To act or work with another. To act together. To associate with another for mutual benefit. Common effort The association of persons for common benefit. A social process in which mutual benefits outweigh disadvantages.

## Cooperation

Fairness is what you perceive to be true in a relationship (what you owe, what you deserve) that does or does not fit your expectations (what you want or need). Justice is the standard used to create your expectations (what you want or need).

### Justice as the standard

Justice is defined in a variety of ways. One interpersonal application of justice is the process of sorting out what belongs to whom, and giving it back. Justice as the standard in relationships begins with individual competence to give and receive freely. Using cooperation to connect, both persons are intentional and responsible to own and take possession of only what is his or hers. Each person releases what is not his or hers and takes up what is his or hers. Justice involves drawing boundaries based on who I am rather than what I can do “for” another.



Making choices that account for, acknowledge and respect the presence of another while remaining separate characterizes cooperation. This ability to regulate oneself in close proximity to another is an indication of maturity. The possibility of being self-conscious without being self-absorbed, aware without being arrogant and connected without being invasive allows trust to develop in a relationship.

Justice recognizes that both persons have already taken possession of what is not theirs and are to give it back. Unlike fairness, in which one person’s gain is at the expense of the other, justice recognizes that returning what does not belong to you enriches both persons in different ways. While the goal of compromise is to get all you can from the other person based on how much you can give, the goal of cooperation is to live trustworthy even when it means you give away what you have come to believe is yours. Fairness begins by assuming the need to do “for” another in order to establish a connection while justice recognizes connection has already occurred and growth requires giving away what you thought was yours.

When a husband feels guilty and wants to blame his wife for “making him feel guilty,” doing justice involves both people. His wife doesn’t accept the blame for his guilt, but gives the guilt back to him recognizing his feelings are his. She may have triggered these feelings, but she isn’t responsible for them. At the same time, he stops and looks within to examine the reasons for his emotional reactivity.

**Responsibility** for oneself results from the **gratitude** a person feels when he or she receives freely. Finally, **humility** and self-regulation are the natural outgrowth when a person is fully and completely accepted in all the weakness and vulnerability he or she brings to the relationship.

Responsibility (Obligation) = Gratitude (Resentment) + Humility (Entitlement)

## **Self-regulation as the method for change**

Justice as the standard for a relationship presupposes that people need to grow. Cooperation requires both persons to face the fear of their partner's rejection and negative reactions as they reveal their inadequacies to each other. While these weaknesses and vulnerabilities have a profoundly negative effect on each person in the relationship, both persons recognize their personal need for forgiveness and therefore give it willingly. Taking responsibility for these personal deficiencies is a function of self-regulation. Clearly, this self-regulation does not occur in the way or the timing of the other person waiting for it.

Allowing another's inadequacies to impact your life requires the ability to accept your partner and stay connected, recognizing your suffering will develop perseverance and character in you. Rather than comparing how one has suffered more than another, both persons regulate their fears, anxiety and reactivity in response to this pain. Neither person wants to hurt the other, but both are willing to be in the process of growing and maturing always appreciating their partner is paying a price to remain connected, yet separate in the relationship. This is called self-regulation.

Mary's fear that John will not spend time with her comes from her belief that he doesn't want to spend time with her. Mary's beliefs about John come from her erroneous assumption that her father didn't want to spend time with her. (Her father was working.) This belief based on fear that John will never want to spend time with her binds her to will, shape and move him to spend time with her based on all she does "for" him. Of course this approach is based on compromise and fairness and does not work.

Cooperating with John, Mary makes room for John to spend more time with his friends than he wants to spend. This is overwhelmingly painful for her as it replicates her experience with her father. How can Mary encourage, foster, support, and facilitate the very fear she has lived with all her life? She can't in her own strength!

Does she trust that he will ever regulate the time he spends with his friends? Does Mary have any evidence that he will regulate himself? Why doesn't Mary trust that John will limit himself with his friends? Because she has never encouraged, even insisted that he spend more time with his friends than he wants to spend with them! Therefore, Mary's mistrust of John has nothing to do with John.

Experiencing Mary's acceptance and support, John will face his fear that she is really just manipulating him. His fear is that Mary will overwhelm him with her emotional demands and that he will not be able to measure up or be good enough for her. John's assumptions about Mary are not about her at all. As a boy, John felt sorry for his mother and although he did everything to take the pressure off her it never seemed to be enough.

Cooperating with Mary would mean he would face his fear of Mary and spend more time with her than she wants from him. But how can John spend more time with her than she wants when he has lived with the fear of not being good enough all his life? He can't in his own strength!

Does John trust that Mary is sincere as she encourages him to spend more time with his friends? Does John have any evidence that Mary will be O.K. with him spending time with his friends? Why doesn't John trust that Mary will limit her emotional demands of him? Because he has not spent more time with Mary than Mary wants him to spend with her. Therefore, John's mistrust of Mary is not about Mary at all.

Mary and John have married into their respective weaknesses and are set up for failure or success based on how they approach their relationship. (We all marry into our weaknesses). Approaching their relationship from the framework of compromise seems reasonable yet will result in defeat and failure. But approaching their relationship using cooperation appears to be a formula for disaster, yet results in success and contentment.

Jesus told his disciples that whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. This paradox is apparent in compromise and cooperation. Efforts at saving one's life through fairness, leverage and less responsibility results in a life lost. While losing one's life through cooperation with your partner results in unexpected transformation resulting in a far better relationship than either person believed was possible.

### **The whole of the relationship is greater than the sum of the parts.**

Cooperation occurs when both persons recognize a bigger process is at work in their lives than either of them can create alone. Adding all that both people bring to the relationship does not account for all that makes up the relationship. The unique combination of both persons creates a third reality, a presence that both acknowledges and reveres.

Listening, anticipating and experiencing this "presence" creates a reverential awareness and gives meaning to interaction. Humility takes on new significance as information is not accusation, comment is not criticism, and words designed to encourage do not discourage. Cooperation grows the relationship toward maturity and health with each person aspiring toward full responsibility.

Both persons remain present for the other in good times and in bad. When in need of direction in life, the other remains still and elicits courage to wait and listen beyond one's self instead of giving into the anxiety by trying harder. Aware that frantic efforts at making life occur on your terms is misguided and short sighted patience allows both to "be still" and the lack of "willfulness" provides the energy to examine life.

Completely accepting each other in apparent transparency is disarming, yet frightening at the same time. Neither person needs to neither exert power nor persuade because both acknowledge a quite authority that transcends one's personal power. Being emptied out of willfulness is what allows both persons to be trustworthy in their relationship. The capacity to listen, yet not judge may inspire the other as he or she recognizes their inability to do the same thing. Direction seems to come from beyond yet at the same time within the relationship. Integrity characterized this life together completely. Fully aware of this process both persons are humbled to be a small part of the relationship.

Experiencing all the weaknesses, failures, mistakes and setbacks a person can bring to the relationship is painful for both persons. While the partner who makes the error is grieved over the suffering caused by their failure, the other is also hurt by these weaknesses. Facing not only your weaknesses, but enduring the undeserved suffering of your partner, takes a sense that your partner will eventually come to regulate themselves in this growth area. In addition, it takes an appreciation that the innocent party has had occasion to be in that role as well and in need of patient forgiveness.

Mary has encouraged John to spend more time with his friends. She appreciates him as a gift in her life and knows she has grown spiritually by giving herself beyond anything she ever dreamed possible. Her relationship with God is stronger as a result of her love for her husband.

John is amazed that Mary would set him free, encouraging him to enjoy his friends. Understanding this is her weakness, he wants to spend time with her, gratefully expressing how much he loves her.

His response is not in her timing or in her way, but resurrection never occurs in your timing or the way you expect. Their relationship grows from Mary's willingness to die on the cross of her anxiety and trust God to sustain her rather than her husband.

Because she has told her husband about her fear of being alone he understands the significance of her growth and cooperates with her by discussing his fear of closeness and emotional intimacy. Their relationship grows as they both acknowledge their weaknesses and give the gift of themselves to the other.

For Mary to confess her fear that John really doesn't want to spend time with her brings a measure of healing and growth to Mary. Facing her fear of John's rejection is difficult, yet liberating. Equally, John's ability to tell Mary of his fear that she will limit or restrict him sets him free of this fear and the fear of communicating openly with her. He learns that Mary is not his mother and that she will regulate herself in ways he has never experienced.