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Should you compromise or collaborate? Here's advice from a psychotherapist

By Andrew Stoor
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Let's start by saying that we have all been let down a garden path. Compromise is so often seen as the gold standard in relationships, especially when we have divergent needs. It is seen as the path of least resistance.

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Yep, I said it. We have all been led down a garden path. Compromise is so often seen as the gold standard in relationships, especially when we have divergent needs. It is seen as the path of least resistance.

Psychotherapist Andrew Stoor, author of Why Things Feel F*cked. Picture supplied

Julie has three kids and a husband who just don't get her. Julie's house is full but the feels deeply alone. Over the last few years, Julie has been dipping off patterns of people-pleasing but still feels her needs are going totally unaddressed by others.

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Julie's husband repeats farming equipment to regional Australia and is away from home a lot. "Mel, we have decided that if he wants to commute to Inner Sydney for work, we will have to compromise and I will travel once a year on my own."

Over the years of our collaboration together, I have heard loud and clear that what Julie crowed most in the relationship with her husband was intimacy and closeness. So, it seemed that this compromise would not get her needs met for togetherness, and quite probably make things much worse.

A compromise is a process of dividing and splitting up territory. It shows a line between where my needs will be met versus where your needs will be met and finds the middle ground. This then assumes that things are fixed and we must share any territory evenly. In compromise, we also give up needs, and the other person does the same. The problem is, only some of our needs get met or, worse, we end up not addressing or even recognising our needs at all.

The only by products possible from this kind of compromise are some of the most toxic emotions to emerge in relationships: resignation and resentment.

Resignation: The feeling and action of giving up, throwing our hands up in the air and behaving that nothing will ever change, so we stop trying. Resignation switches off our motivation, care and ability to create new options and pathways forward in our relationships.

Resentment: The feeling of unfairness and injustice of us not getting our needs met. Resentment sets root for breakout, remains our sense of safety and accelerates feelings of fear and disconnection. This activates our human capacity for rumination and overthinking which negatively affects our ability to think clearly and orientate ourselves inside of our relationships. Resentment is the direct opposite of gratitude, it extinguishes trust, belonging, connection.

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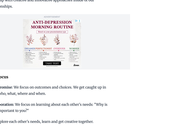

Why Things Feel F**cked by Andrew Stoor, Publisher: Hachette

If these toxic emotions are left to run wild, separation and the end of the relationship are inevitable. So, if not compromise, what?

I'm so glad you asked. The answer is **collaboration**. Collaboration is a creative, playful and dynamic process of creating something that wouldn't have been possible if we both didn't take the time to create it. It intentionally creates a new playground for people to be innovative, constructive and integrate our individuality and unique differences as we achieve things together. In collaborative partnerships, both of our needs are centred as important and we work together collaboratively to meet as many of our needs as possible at the same time.

The by-products of great collaborations are connection and creativity. This creates the deeper intimacy, trust, empathy and opportunity that's made possible inside of great human partnerships. Inside of effective collaborations, people take ownership and responsibility for the things they commit to and value how their unique differences are their advantages. Both people feel seen, heard and valued for their uniqueness and what they bring to the table. Collaboration is the opposite of annihilation. Our needs for safety and autonomy are met, we tap into our unique instincts, insights and talents and we unlock more possibilities to come up with creative and innovative approaches inside of our relationships.

Our focus

Compromise: We focus on outcomes and choices. We get caught up in why, who, what, where and when.

Collaboration: We focus on learning about each other's needs. "Why is this important to you?"

We explore each other's needs, learn and get creative together.

Our needs

Compromise: We draw a middle line between my needs and yours. We pick which needs get to be met and which needs need to be sacrificed.

Collaboration: We creatively draw new lines between and around our core needs. We ensure all core needs are met in any choice or solution we come up with.

Our emotions

Compromise: We fess one anger, defensiveness and attacks to get to a solution no one really likes or wants.

Collaboration: We fess calm, connectedness and curiosity together to get to a solution that empowers both of us.

Our power

Compromise: We contribute for the collaboration for an imbalance of power. One person probably wins over the other.

Collaboration: We have created shared power, respect for the other person's autonomy and co-created something new.

Our relationship

Compromise: We have made room for resentment, resignation and feeling stuck in our relationship.

Collaboration: We have deepened trust, set up the conditions to continually grow and have together. We feel inspired.

Our future

Compromise: We focus on the end result and limit ourselves to this "destination" alone.

Collaboration: We focus on how this will open up and create future pathways and possibilities for our future.

The end result

Compromise: "We really have sacrificed a lot and lost something here."

Collaboration: "We have both gained something and created new possibilities."

"Julie, I am wondering if there are some other options?" I asked. "What other creative ideas could you come up with?"

Julie started to navigate her way in new ideas that she could invite her husband to explore. Could Julie spend some time at the beginning of a family convoy trip alone to rest and recover from her intense child caring responsibilities? Could Julie and her husband book a gateway weekend away in remote Australia? What would it be like if Julie's husband could delegate some of his travel to one of his team members? Could this free up more time for connection and support?

It's creative and collaborative approaches like these that counteract the harmful effects of the world's systems of disconnection. Connection propagates connection, it predicts more trust and as we have learnt in the second part of this book, it opens our neurological capacity that helps us build the types of life-enhancing relationships we all need to shift and thrive in high levels of chaos, complexity and change.

This is an edited extract from Why Things Feel F*cked (Inside Issue), £10.99, a "practical, no-nonsense guide for anyone feeling burnt out, stuck or disconnected in today's chaotic world" by psychotherapist and leadership coach Andrew Stoor, a registered clinical member of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. Australia, pbooks.com/andrewstoor.

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