Map Your Inner Patterns · Individual parts map · About 4 minutes

You Can Want Two Things Without a Bad Side

Listening to competing concerns without making one the enemy

The rehearsal has moved. Kai can already hear the music and picture the welcome desk where they promised to be.

You're selfish if you go to rehearsal. You're a pushover if you stay at the desk.

In this fictional situation, two worthwhile things have become evidence against the person who wants them. Kai cares about the event and loves playing music. The scheduling conflict is real. The character trial adds another problem without helping resolve the first.

You may recognize this habit. One wish gets to represent your goodness while the other becomes something to overcome. Perhaps generosity is always respectable and enjoyment always suspect. Or perhaps you have worked so hard to stop accommodating others that keeping a commitment now feels like surrender. Either way, you lose the chance to understand the actual choice.

Let the wishes speak plainly

Try hearing Kai's concerns without the accusations: “I want to honor what I agreed to do.” “I want music to have a place in my life.” These sentences leave something useful to consider. A promise has been made, and an opportunity matters.

Internal Family Systems offers one way to describe this kind of disagreement as different parts of a person seeking different things.[1] Some people find that language helps them become less harsh with themselves. Others prefer to talk about competing wishes or priorities. You can use whichever language makes your experience easier to understand. There is no need to populate your mind with characters or discover a childhood explanation for a crowded Thursday evening.

What happens next depends partly on other people. Kai could ask whether another organizer is willing to cover the desk. Until someone agrees, the original commitment remains Kai's responsibility. Going to rehearsal on the assumption that somebody will manage would leave the practical problem with the event organizers.

Suppose nobody can cover it. Kai stays and misses rehearsal. That decision can be responsible and disappointing. The disappointment tells us that music mattered; it doesn't make the decision a failure. Kai might later reconsider how many evenings to commit to community work, without pretending this particular promise never existed.

A choice with something left over

We sometimes expect enough inner listening to produce an answer everyone inside us likes. Life does not reliably offer that arrangement. Time is limited. Money, disability and necessary care may narrow the options further. Another person's willingness cannot be negotiated entirely within our own minds.

The useful change may be smaller: you can make a choice without condemning the wish you cannot satisfy. You can also discover that an obligation needs renegotiating rather than automatically keeping it forever.

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Listen again to the accusations Kai makes. Ask which facts each accusation left out. The question can end there. It does not require a compromise. Kai still has an evening to decide about, and music is still something Kai loves.

Kai's evening shows the difficulty of hearing two real wishes while keeping an obligation in view.

I would give both wishes a little air. Then there is the matter of telling the people at the welcome desk what they can count on.

Companion reading · The Parts of You That Disagree

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Map Your Inner Patterns · Individual parts map (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] IFS Institute. (n.d.). The Internal Family Systems model outline. Source.

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