

Withdrawal:

Thawing Out Your Marriage Cold War!

By Kevin Downing Ph.D. MFT

Researchers tell us that we can predict if a couple will divorce or remain married with better than 90% accuracy. Four styles of conflict best predict that divorce will occur. The second conflict style is called – WITHDRAWAL.

Research tells us that **withdrawal** in marriage by either husband or wife is lethal. It destroys the ‘oneness’ intended for us to enjoy with our mate. But why is it so damaging? The answer:

Ambiguity - the not knowing of how or if we will ever come together again.

When we use the Five-Minute Time-Out (see the handout on this topic) we know who, when and how we will reconnect. This is not the case with withdrawal. Our minds often go to catastrophic worries of “Will we ever get back together?” “Is this the end?” “Who will get the kids and where will we live?” This creates tremendous stress and drains our energy.

It exhausts the relationship which can lead to its failure.

We find that men pull away more than women (although women can certainly withdraw as well). It was previously thought that men withdraw more in marriage because they don't care as much about growth or dealing with the problems of the relationship. The research seems to indicate that men (or women) who withdraw do so because they don't feel emotionally safe. They are afraid that things will wind up escalating. So, what is the **remedy** for withdrawal?

It's a regular time of checking in and communicating with the ability to manage conflict.

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The natural “soil erosion” of marriage is to take each other for granted and to let our marriage “investments” slide. (And it often includes unresolved bitterness and resentments from past hurts.)

Do you remember when you were first dating? You had to peel the phone off your ear because you had been talking for FOUR hours! That was a huge investment in your relationship. As time passes the pressures of life closes in. Pressures like career, parenting, finances, unmet expectations and so forth. It’s important to carve out time, (that is “make time”) for your marriage. Many have argued, “That’s not natural. If you have to plan it or work at it it’s not natural.” My response is, “Believe me, you don’t want natural.”

Anything great takes intentional effort, precise focus, and plenty of elbow grease.

(We call these efforts our **marital disciplines**. They have parallels to spiritual, athletic, academic or work disciplines).

From time to time I will hear someone say to my wife, “*You two have a really good marriage.*” She responds with, “*We work hard at it.*”

Some ideas (*i.e. marital disciplines*) for connecting with your loved one –

- 1) The **Five Minute Time Out** when you perceive that you or your mate is withdrawing
- 2) The **Feeling Wordlist Check-in** Emotional Intimacy in about Ten Minutes
- 3) **Speaker Listener** communication technique for developing deep understanding
- 4) **Validation: of You Mate’s Emotions** The heart of emotional intimacy - four brief steps in 60 seconds or less - once you practice it

If you are a withdrawer – plan to go the opposite direction – **PURSUE** your mate. But, have a plan for dealing with conflict first. Review with your partner the rules for the Five-Minute Time-Out – and agree that you will follow them before you start your conversation.

Also – change your expectations. Let go of “problem solving” and getting your partner to “think straight” by **debating and educating** (*i.e.* arguing) with them and instead pursue **UNDERSTANDING** them. Using the **Speaker Listener technique** (a great tool) can help you accomplish this.

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If You Are a Withdrawer

Consider the parable of the 100th sheep. (Luke 15:3-7) You remember the guy that has a 100 sheep, but one was lost. He leaves the 99 to go look for the one missing. In fact he travels way into the back country – way out of his way – to find his valuable sheep. Jesus is making the point that God seeks us out in a similar way. Pursuing that which is valuable is a character trait of God. The application is this – go find your mate. Meet them where they are at. Don't condemn their "lostness" – but rejoice in connecting with them. (Regardless of what shape they are in.)

If you have a very angry sheep who tries to bit you – use the **Five Minute Time Out**, the **Validation: of You Mates Emotions** and **Speaker Listener** exercises. Responding in healthy ways to conflict your job. If you review the materials ahead of time with your mate, they may be more co-operative. (Remember they may feel abandoned and rejected by you – that's a lot of hurt!)

If You Are a Pursuer

Remember who your Source is. The Psalmist wrote, "**God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.**" Psalm 46:1. Your mate is "a" source and sometimes that source is not available or non-functional. The very most you will ever get from your mate is human love. (And the very most they will ever get from you is human love.)

It's time you change your expectations.

It's **reasonable** to expect love, connection and support from your mate but it is not always **realistic** (depending on your mate and the state of the marriage).

Fill you tanks from multiple healthy resources. From the book of Hebrews(10:25) we read, "Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big day approaching." So if you can't connect with your mate go get healthy support and fellowship – with friends, your pastor, your counselor – in support groups – reach out for help and renew your strength!

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If You Are Harboring Resentments and Bitterness

Life is not fair and this is especially true in marriage. People let us down and sometimes out and out betray us. It's easy to allow these hurts to consume us. It blinds us to the opportunities and blessings that we have in the present and in our future. It pulls our power plug out of the wall.

Forgiveness is a requirement. Jesus said that if we don't forgive God will not forgive us (Matt. 6:14 and 18:35). We have been forgiven of so much.

God forgave us and let it go. We are to let it go too.

'Trust' is a different topic. Trust is earned. We often say - **trust = faithful actions** through **time**. It is possible to forgive and to not trust another person. In this way we can have appropriate boundaries.

Consider a successful entrepreneur. Walt Disney filed for bankruptcy in 1923. For many a 'BK' becomes the defining moment of their life – for the rest of their life. Walt Disney was able to see past it and fill his mind with the opportunities that were before him.

In the face of bankruptcy Walt saw Disneyland!

The apostle Paul said "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me." Philippians 3:12-14. Paul's "forgetting" was not blanking it out of his mind or denying that it existed. He had a very clear recollection of his past and spelled it out in great detail.

His "forgetting" was not allowing his past to limit his future.

So what do you do with your resentment and bitterness? Acknowledge them. Take them to the foot of the cross. Give them to God and confess them to others. James 5:16. Grieve through your losses and let a great friend, pastor or counselor help you.

Don't have conversations or arguments in your mind with people who have hurt you. Don't give them "free rent" in your mind. Your job is to reduce these hurts to just events in your past without an overwhelming emotional or spiritual charge. It's the path to being emotionally free. (For more read **A Lasting Promise** by Scott Stanley).

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