



Wendy Trainor
communication and healing

Withdrawal and avoidance: Hide and seek

Withdrawal and avoidance are ways people demonstrate an unwillingness to get into or stay with important conversations. "Withdrawal" varies from getting up and leaving the room to shutting down during an argument. The withdrawer may tend to go quiet during an argument or quickly agree to something in order to end the discussion, with no real intent to follow through. An avoider is similarly reluctant to be involved in a conversation, and may be active in preventing it from happening in the first place.

Therapists often see a pattern where one partner avoids dealing with issues or withdraws, and the other partner pursues. The more pursuers push, the more withdrawers pull away – and the more withdrawers pull away, the more pursuers try to grab hold of them. Pursuers often become angry and critical in their efforts to get the withdrawers attention. This negative cycle keeps people feeling distant from each other.

Research has demonstrated that, while the person who withdraws may appear calm on the outside, there is a lot of internal physiological arousal and they withdraw in an attempt to calm down. They are often concerned that they will say or do something that will be detrimental to the relationship or are simply too overwhelmed to talk about what is happening. Important issues within the relationship must be addressed.

The withdrawer needs to learn to deal more directly with the issues and the pursuer often needs to provide more space for the withdrawer. One way to do this is to negotiate a time when an important issue will be discussed. The withdrawer may want to schedule it for when s/he has had time to think more about the issue or calm down a bit. What is most important for the pursuer is to know that the issue will be addressed.

In Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy, the therapist helps to create an environment where the couple feels safe. Then each individual is able to explore what is going on for them under their position of pursuing or withdrawing. Often the pursuer is feeling hurt, alone, or not important and their criticism or anger is an attempt to close the distance they are feeling in the relationship. The withdrawer may be feeling rejected, inadequate, overwhelmed or even numb and withdraws in an attempt to calm the relationship down. As each individual better understands themselves and their partner they feel safer in the relationship and a new, more positive cycle of interaction emerges.

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