

People have different intimacy needs. You can measure this need on a simple scale of 1 to 10 where 1 equals having no need for closeness and intimacy and 10 equals having a strong need for closeness and intimacy. On a scale of 1 – 10 your need for closeness and intimacy might lie at about 8 (needing a lot of closeness) while your partners need for intimacy and closeness might lie at about 4 (needing just a little).

As you can infer, this creates an obvious difficulty. How much closeness is there going to be in the relationship? In a healthy relationship there is what we call ‘stretching’ – that is that each partner stretches themselves a little in order to find a compromised balance. If your partner, who only needs 4 units of intimacy, realizes that you need 8, stretches himself to provide 5 or even 6 units then you are closer as a couple. Similarly if you curtail yourself a little to be able to be happy with 7 or 6 units of intimacy, then you are both working together. Neither of you are getting nor giving exactly what you want, but both of you are happy and content to stretch yourselves because of your care for the other.

However, the greater the distance between peoples needs for closeness the greater the potential difficulties. If a woman with a need for 8 units of intimacy marries a man with a need for 2 units, then you may have problems. The woman may spend years pursuing her partner for affection, interest, or even responsibility. The man may spend years trying to hide or by pushing her away. This, of course cannot go on forever, so both parties may eventually withdraw to a fixed angry position where he feels put upon and she feels ignored.

We have a rule of thumb in couples therapy, which states, “You should never pursue a distancer”. We say this because we realize that in intimate relationship the person with the least desire for intimacy is actually then one who controls and regulates it. Men, who have less need for intimacy than their wives, are typically the ones who control the emotional distance between them.

What we find is that to create change, it is easier to get a ‘pursuer’ to stop chasing than it is to get a ‘distancer’ to stop withdrawing. It is easier to get a woman to ‘back off’ than it is to coax the man from his corner.

People who pursue tend to be over-responsible and thus find it hard to step back. If you are the pursuer you will find it hard to let go of this style. In most cases women will say, “If I stop pursuing him then he will withdraw completely and be totally off the hook”. If that is the case then it is a sad statement about the state of the relationship and very often, rather than face this fact, women will keep the relationship ticking-over by keeping the pursuit game going.

I will frequently ask a woman in this instance “what might happen if you were to let go and realize that he is never going to give you more than the 3 units he provides?” This, for the woman, often evokes sadness because it acknowledges the loss that she may have felt for many years but has been reluctant to name.

Therefore, if you have a need for a lot of closeness and your partner seems to have no need for closeness, how you resolve this for yourself is an interesting challenge. Some couples are happy with the pursuit and distance because in many instances the

distancer likes to be pursued and caught because, deep down, he wants to be close to his partner but is psychologically unable to show it. Alternatively, the pursuer may like to pursue because, psychologically, she is unable to step back and let go this responsibility.

Other couples, however, resort to their respective corners and establish an angry and fixed distance where she has grown resentful of having to carry the responsibility for the relationship, and he has grown resentful of her giving up the pursuit.

Changing these patterns is difficult but can be done with courage and imagination. If you are driven by bitterness then change is virtually impossible. If, however, you can initiate change in your relationship with a lightness of heart and even a sense of humour then things are possible. This lightness of heart is essential because it requires a philosophical and wise realization that you have become as much a cartoon character as he has.