

## Pursuit & Distance

If you are in an unhappy marriage or relationship you probably believe that you are unhappy because your partner refuses to do what he or she should. Assuming you are a female reader, you probably believe that for some reason he defies doing what he should. It seems as if he deliberately withholds from you what you need. I call this the “Withholding Myth”. The myth states that you believe that your unhappiness is caused by your partners withholding from you what you need. When you believe this you, of course, have no option other than to feel persecuted or angry.

However, it can be a sobering thought to realise that almost every person in an unhappy relationship tends to subscribe to this belief about their partner – that they are suffering the consequence of their partners deliberate withholding of love, responsibility, or affection.

It is worth looking at this myth and where it comes from. It’s origin is really in childhood. It is a relic of a childhood belief that our parent knows and has what we need. The baby assumes that the reason he/she is not getting it is because either the parent is withholding it or because he/she is not protesting enough. So the baby cries and creates distress to ensure that the mother gives the milk, the cuddling, or the reassurances necessary. This is the way infants and mothers/father’s interact. This is the basis of the love bond and attachment.

However, we carry this unconscious belief into adulthood. When we are thrown again into intimate relationship, we still respond with anger and protest at the person who *appears to be withholding what is needed*. More often than not, however, our partner, unlike our mother, does not actually have to give so genuinely does not know what we want.

In I am working with a spouse who is very angry at her husbands failures to give what is needed I will often do the following: Rather than encouraging her to increase her protest I will explore with her what it would mean if she operated on the assumption that he may not be able to give what she needs. This, of course, is not a person’s preferred way of looking at things. A woman will say “Well if I believe that then I just let him off the hook and let him get away with murder”, or she will say “then I would just give up because I know he can say and do what he needs to”.

I usually push a bit further and say “Well, think about it for a while. Let’s just assume, for the sake of the argument, that he just can’t be the person you want him to be, for whatever reasons. What would that mean?”. “Well”, she might reply, “that would be very sad for me. In fact there would be a lot of grief and sorrow in coming to that point. I would need to let go of the dream of what we could be as a couple. I’d need to let go”.

At this point the woman will usually feel tearful because she would become aware of how hard she has tried to get him to be better and to improve. The letting go of the dream would be painful. I would continue to encourage this woman to *feel* her way into this. I might then say: “Ok, so you’d have to let go the encouraging and pleading and that would make you feel you were letting go of the marriage you hoped for. But, think about the possibility that it might make a little space for something different to happen between you. What do you think would happen with your husband if you did let go. And I don’t mean letting go in a resentful way but in an honest, courageous, and enlightened way.” She might respond “Well, I think he would be shocked, relieved, surprised maybe. I fear that he would take advantage of me and just do his own thing. Or else he would be curious or even afraid that he is losing me”.

A breakthrough is often possible for couples if one partner can shift from a position of trying to control or influence the other to a position of letting go with strength and integrity. We have a rule in family therapy which says “Don’t pursue a distancer”. What it means is that to the degree that an ‘emotional pursuer’ (usually the woman) chases an ‘emotional distancer’ (usually the man) the more likely it is that the distancer keeps withdrawing. If a ‘pursuer’ can stop pursuing then a distancer is less likely to distance - because there is less to withdraw from. Now if the ‘pursuer’ then begins to distance herself it is almost inevitable that the pursuer then begins to pursue a little bit – maybe even for the first time.

Emotional pursuers do find it very hard to stop being over-responsible, over-anxious, over-needy. The reflex of the pursuer is to try to get the other person to respond in the way they need. If you like that you have probably berated yourself for being anxious or needy in this way. You may, in a huff, have decided you are not doing it anymore. However, your anger at having to let go probably just fed into your righteousness and make you even angrier than before.

The real challenge is to be able to slow down your pursuit in a way that has integrity courage, and confidence. You will need to find other ways to have your needs met and to re-imagine what your relationship can look like. You will need to see your partner less as someone who is withholding stuff from you and more as someone who is unable to give you all of what you need. What often happen is that the 'distancer; begins to learn to do what he needs to do because h now has the space within which to learn it. This is actually as true of children as it is of adults. Over-responsible parents make under-responsible children. We all need to switch from parenting our partners to loving in a more adult way. This can create anxiety but it can also open up space for something different to happen.