

There are two repetitive patterns in marriage and intimate relationships. The first pattern is that of emotional 'pursuit and distance'. The second is that of 'demand and defiance' regarding responsibility. I will firstly describe 'pursuit and distance'.

In many relationships one partner is a 'Pursuer' and the other is a 'Distancer'. The 'pursuer' assumes the role of pursuing the 'distancer' for contact, closeness, and intimacy. The 'distancer' retreats from the pursuer in search of more emotional distance between them. Seventy percent of the time, the pursuer is the woman. (This is so because of gender differences and cultural conditioning). When she is pursuing she is looking for more emotional contact and closeness from her husband or partner. She moves toward him wanting emotional intimacy. The intensity of this pursuit can range from mild gestures to anxious and needy pursuit. The pursuer expresses her needs and is therefore more open and accessible.

The 'distancer', who is male most (but not all) of the time, tends to pull back from closeness. He fears being smothered or controlled and tends to withdraw from overt advances by his partner. He tends to be content with the status quo and is reluctant to move toward his partner. He finds it hard to show her that he needs or that he wants her. This pattern of distancing is maintained because of fears of being smothered and losing control. In the early part of the relationship a 'distancer' may well have done the pursuing because he will have felt in control of the emotional distance between them.

You can see how, when a pursuer marries a 'distancer' how they can set each other off and create a relationship within which her pursuit and his distancing become exaggerated over time. The more he withdraws from her, the more likely she is to pursue him and the more she pursues him the more likely he is to withdraw from her. As things deteriorate, her pursuit becomes more anxious and distressed and his distancing becomes more withdrawn and rejecting.

This pattern can be seen very early in relationships also. A man who tends to be a 'distancer' can feel safe and strong in a relationship where he is needed. In the early years, her pursuit of him feels loving and secure. Equally, a pursuing woman can feel safe in being with a man who accepts her love and is strong and not as needy as she feels. She is attracted to his strength. He is attracted to her devotion.

In functional relationships where there is a pursuer and a 'distancer' the positions are never extreme and she is less pursuing and more expressive while he is less distancing and more present. Their styles of her moving toward and him moving away may persist, but the 'distancer' between them is never very far. She accepts and loves his being present to her and gets enough affection to feel loved. He accepts and loves her availability and gets enough space to feel safe and secure. It works.

However, when her pursuit becomes increasingly anxious, frustrated, and needy then she begins to lose her inner confidence. When his distancing becomes withdrawn, resentful, and depressive then he begins to want to escape. Her pursuit of closeness becomes an anxious pursuit of basic recognition. His distancing from contact becomes an angry withdrawal from demands. When patterns of pursuit and distance become extreme and repetitious they can breed frustration and depressiveness.

The second common pattern I mentioned is that of demand and defiance regarding responsibility. While pursuit and distance relates to emotional closeness and the emotional distance between partners. Patterns of 'demand' and 'defiance' are more to do with control and responsibility. In this pattern, the woman will find herself making more and more demands of her husband to do certain things and assume certain domestic and family responsibilities.

At its worst, the wife becomes like her husband's mother and has a list of chores and responsibilities that she instructs him to do. The husband, at his worst, does just enough of these things to get away with it. However, he will defy her demands by 'forgetting', refusing, or re-prioritising. Patterns of demand and defiance are not unlike those of pursuit and distance but the fight is about control and responsibility rather than closeness.

The ultimate solutions to this pattern is that the relationship turns into a demand-comply relationship where the couple becomes like Richard and Hyacinth in "Keeping Up Appearances", one where he withdraws entirely from the relationship and absents himself from family life, or one where she ignores him and relegates him to the status of another child in the house. When these patterns of demand-defy become ingrained they breed inevitable resentment and bitterness.

Of course not all demand-defy or pursuit-distance relationships are stereotypically female-male. For example, when it comes to control there are many relationships where the husband is the domestic-marine-sergeant and the wife is the walker-on-egg-shells. Equally, when it comes to closeness, there are many relationships where the husband vigilantly seeks to please his distant wife in the hope of some emotional contact or recognition.

When you look at your relationship in these ways, consider how you might change your own predictability. Maybe if you change a bit it can trigger some small change in your relationship.

<p><b>Colm will be holding a seminar entitled "The Courage of Happiness" on Saturday April 16<sup>th</sup> . For more information text COURAGE to 087-1676687 or <a href="mailto:couragetobehapy@eircom.net">couragetobehapy@eircom.net</a></b></p>
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