

10.3 The Third State of Mind: Withdrawal

Reason would dictate that demands, disrespect and anger are not the way to resolve conflicts in marriage. But with the Giver and Taker as the only instinctive alternatives, reason doesn't play much of a role in marital problem-solving. Instead, mood is almost everything, and after a fight, most couples do not feel much like going back to the rule of the Giver.

So they leave the Taker in charge, and the Taker adopts a new approach. In the state of Conflict it's strategy is fight. But in the state of Withdrawal, it's strategy is flight.

When you're in the state of Conflict, your Taker tries to force your spouse to meet your needs, making demands, showing disrespect, and threatening your spouse with angry outbursts to get its way. But if that doesn't work--if your spouse does not meet your needs--your Taker suggests a new approach to the problem: Withdrawal. It tries to convince you that your spouse is not worth the effort, and you should engage in emotional divorce.

In the state of Withdrawal, spouses no longer feel emotionally bonded or in love, and emotional defenses are raised. Neither one wants to try to meet the other's needs, and both have given up on attempts to get their own needs met by the other. One becomes two. They are completely independent, united only in living arrangements, finances and childrearing, although they often have to keep up appearances for neighbors and friends.

When one spouse enters the state of Withdrawal, the other usually follows. After all, what is the point? If she is meeting none of his needs and rebuffing every effort he makes to meet hers, he might as well give up, too. The thoughtless behavior by each spouse toward the other becomes too great to bear, so they stop caring. Trust is a faint memory.

Emotional needs can be met only when we are emotionally vulnerable to someone who meets those needs. When we are in the state of Withdrawal, our emotional needs cannot be met because we've raised our defenses. Even when a spouse tries to meet an emotional need, the defensive wall blunts the effect to prevent any Love Bank deposits.

Couples in Withdrawal are really in a state of emotional divorce. When they've been in Withdrawal for any length of time, they will sleep in separate rooms, take separate vacations, and eat meals at different times. They will not communicate unless they must. If that doesn't work, they either separate or obtain a legal divorce.

I've already explained that the states of Intimacy and Conflict discourage negotiating. But in the state of Withdrawal there isn't the slightest interest in it. In Intimacy, couples must only ask in order to receive. In Conflict, they fight to try to get what they want, and the bargain is usually less than intelligent. But in Withdrawal, there is no discussion, no bargaining, not even arguing. In that state, a spouse is unwilling to do anything for his or her spouse or let the spouse do anything in return.

When a couple is in the state of Withdrawal, the marriage seems hopeless. There is no willingness to be thoughtful or to meet each other's emotional needs, and no willingness to even talk about the problems. When both spouses are in the state of Withdrawal, at that point in time, it really is hopeless, because neither are at all interested in saving the marriage.

But the state of Withdrawal doesn't usually last very long. Sooner than most couples think, at least one spouse has the presence of mind to try to break the deadlock. When that happens, it's possible for that spouse to lead the other all the way back to the state of Intimacy. But it's possible only if the Giver and Taker are relegated to the back room.