

## Relationship Help: Making sense of the withdrawn husband

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

Couples who seek out relationship help and marriage advice are often locked in disagreements that go nowhere. And when you and your spouse/partner are in the throws of conflict, you probably assume you have nothing in common—especially during those times when your husband seems to shutdown emotionally and withdraw from you.

However, the likelihood is that you and your mate share common threads in all that fighting—those commonalities are just going unrecognized. You might be surprised to discover that when it feels like you and your partner are miles apart on a particular issue, you actually have very similar goals.

### **Meet Jennifer and Eric: Immersed in marital conflict**

#### **Jennifer's perspective of the relationship problem:**

When Jennifer contacted me for relationship help, she was at her wits' end. During our marriage counseling session she described feeling "punished" by what she perceived as Eric's unwillingness to deal with important relationship issues.

As she described, "Eric runs away from things. He'd rather put his head in the sand than face reality..."

#### **Eric's perspective of the relationship problem:**

Eric appeared tired and barely present during our first meeting. According to Eric, Jennifer was like a boxer on the offensive, shadowing his every move, and just waiting for the right opportunity to pounce.

As he described, "Jennifer is constantly on my back for every little thing. I just don't want to hear it anymore, so I retreat. I'm tired of the nagging..."

Like most couples entangled in conflict, Jennifer and Eric appear miles apart.

But they are actually struggling with *similar* emotional reactions. For instance, each described feeling:

Frustrated;  
Angry;  
Misunderstood;  
And emotionally overwhelmed.

Here are a few other commonalities between them, even during times of conflict: They were both motivated to stop arguing, and, despite their misunderstandings, Jennifer and Eric continued to hold similar relationship goals; each described a desire to have a harmonious, loving marriage and to enjoy one another like they've done in the past.

Couples often overlook the fact that they have common goals, especially when marital and relationship problems are outweighing the positives.

### **The seeds of ongoing conflict**

If the possibility exists that during relationship upheavals you and your spouse/partner will experience similar emotional reactions (that you'd both rather not be having) and continue to hold the same marital or relationship goals, then what is it that prevents an end to incessant conflict?

*You and your spouse/partner may have different conflict-styles (different ways of handling stress). And it is these differences that can fuel conflict, even when you both want a positive outcome.*

#### **Jennifer's style of handling stress/conflict:**

Her goal-need during times of stress and conflict is to remain *engaged and connected* with Eric in order to resolve the upheavals and reach a harmonious outcome. So she *pursues* Eric.

#### **Eric's style of handling stress/conflict:**

Eric's goal-need during times of stress and conflict is to *disengage* from what he perceives as the source of his distress (Jennifer) in order to emotionally regroup and ultimately reach a harmonious outcome. So he *withdraws* from Jennifer.

Both Eric and Jennifer are trying to feel better (reduce the distress of conflict) and improve the situation the best they know how.

#### **When the solution becomes the problem**

These coping (stylistic) differences can be summarized as follows:

~Jennifer's connection-need is heightened when she feels distressed;

~Eric's solitude-need is heightened when he feels distressed.

Jennifer's solution (perceived as "nagging" by Eric in those moments) and Eric's solution (perceived as "running away" by Jennifer in those moments) are on opposite ends of the coping spectrum, yet they're both designed to turn a troubling situation around (to end conflict and restore peace).

Which coping-style do you and your spouse/partner use during times of stress or conflict?

You and your partner can gain a healthier perspective and feel more empathic to the different ways you each handle stress/conflict when you and your partner realize that you're both trying to bring about the same positive end result (albeit through different means). Try to hold onto this fact, especially when your relationship is hitting those rough patches that all relationships seem to go through at some point.

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## **Author Bio**

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

You can reach Dr. Nicastro via his website <http://www.strengthenyourrelationship.com>