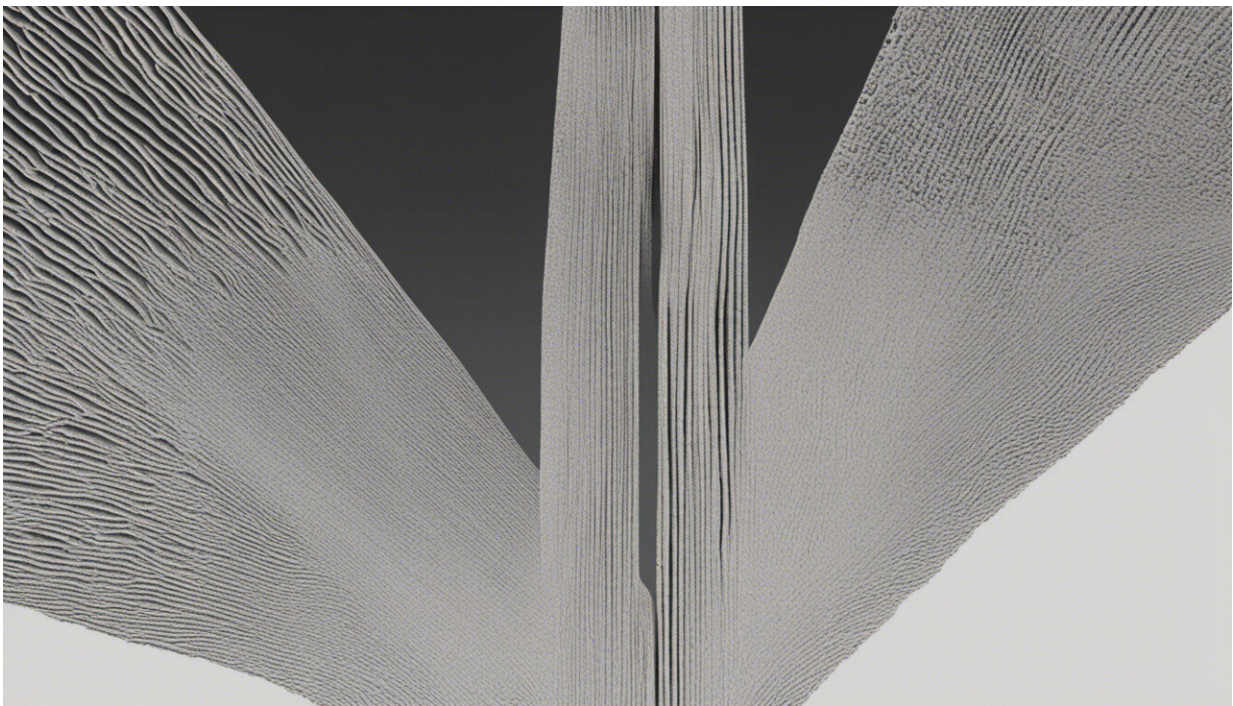


Couples' conflicts: Withdrawal or expecting your partner to mind-read hurts relationships, but in different ways

January 7 2015, by Terry Goodrich



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When you have a conflict with your spouse or significant other, do you withdraw like a turtle into its shell? Or perhaps you expect your partner to be a mind reader about what ticks you off?

Those are two of the most common types of disengagement in relationships, and both can be harmful, but in different ways and for different reasons, says researcher Keith Sanford, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and [neuroscience](#) in Baylor University's College of Arts & Sciences.

"Withdrawal is the most problematic for relationships," Sanford said. "It's a defensive tactic that people use when they feel they are being attacked, and there's a direct association between withdrawal and lower satisfaction overall with the relationship."

Meanwhile, "passive immobility"—expecting your [partner](#) to be a mind-reader—is a tactic people use when they feel anxious in a relationship, and it makes it especially difficult for couples to make progress toward resolving conflicts. But it may not be as harmful down the line as withdrawal, he said.

The study by Sanford and other Baylor researchers—"Two Types of Disengagement During Couples' Conflicts: Withdrawal and Passive Immobility"—appears in *Psychological Assessment*, the journal of the American Psychological Association.

Withdrawal does not necessarily influence whether a couple can resolve a conflict, said Sanford, who has done several previous studies on couples' conflicts. But expecting or hoping the other person will be a mind reader has a direct influence on the couple's ability to settle the issue.

The research consisted of three studies:

- In the first, 2,588 married or cohabitating participants completed an anonymous questionnaire. They described a single, specific conflict; rated how much they used withdrawal or passive

immobility; and completed a relationship satisfaction index.

- In the second, 223 adults in committed [romantic relationships](#) completed scales measuring withdrawal, expectations of mind reading, attachment, concerns, emotion, [relationship](#) satisfaction and communication.
- In the third, 135 undergraduate students in committed romantic relationships wrote about a conflict, then responded to questions about [disengagement](#), communication and emotion during the conflict.

Withdrawing when a partner criticizes or complains is a way of avoiding a perceived threat and is "more characteristic of unhappiness. Just about everyone does that from time to time, but you see more of that in distressed relationships," Sanford said.

The research showed that individuals were more likely to report withdrawal if they were bored or apathetic. "There's a desire to maintain autonomy, control and distance," Sanford said.

Meanwhile, those who expected a partner to know what is wrong without being told are anxious, feeling neglected rather than threatened.

"You're worried about how much your partner loves you, and that's associated with neglect. You feel sad, hurt and vulnerable," Sanford said.

Conflicts in which one partner expects the other to mind-read were more likely to lead to negative communication and anger—and that can lead to a Catch-22.

"Often, you have one person who withdraws and the other demands. The more the one demands and complains, the more the other withdraws, and so on," Sanford said.

"It's an issue both of being aware of when these behaviors are occurring and of finding an alternative—a more constructive, polite approach to resolve [conflict](#)," he said. "And at times, that's easier said than done."

Provided by Baylor University

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