

# Men and Intimacy: Why Some Men Withdraw From Intimacy

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

*“What is the most important thing you want from your husband or boyfriend?”*

This was the question I posed to my bi-monthly women’s group. Over the next hour, there was laughter, tears and frustration as the group pondered this question. But a theme emerged that united the women when one of the members proclaimed: “What I want from my husband is so simple. If he’d just show me more attention and appreciation I’d be happy. I don’t know why that is so difficult.”

Every woman in that group nodded in agreement.

## **The Universal Need to Feel Appreciated**

I believe what emerged from this group captures the essence of what *all* people want and need from their intimate relationships: To feel *appreciated* by the person who is supposed to love you more than anyone else. Showing appreciation is a powerful way to deepen intimacy.

I presented this information to my men’s group. Several of the members showed an understanding of this need and stated that they feel the same way. I was surprised, however, to hear several members state:

*“Yeah, but if I give my wife more attention, it’ll never be enough. She’ll want more and more. I bet that’s why so many guys are stingy with their attention.”*

Though I’ve heard men voice similar opinions in my work with couples, I was surprised by how adamant several of the group members were in this belief. Even some of the self-proclaimed “sensitive” males of the group said that they’ve felt this way at one point in their relationships.

**Basically these men were saying that they withdraw emotionally as a means of self-protection in order to prevent feeling overwhelmed.**

I set out to convince these men that their basic premise about women was incorrect.

**Let’s examine the men’s viewpoint more closely:**

*“But if I give my wife more attention it’ll never be enough...”*

Let’s call this belief the *bottomless pit* theory of emotional needs. Anyone who holds this belief assumes that the emotional needs of his/her partner are so vast that these needs can never be satisfied—the more you give, the more your partner will cling to you and demand every ounce of energy you’re able to muster. It’s like someone who loves food but can never become full enough.

It must be pretty scary to be in a marriage or committed relationship and hold this viewpoint. I’m exhausted just thinking about it!

Why would some men hold this view?

**A food analogy:**

Research shows that if you feed someone a really low calorie diet for a couple of weeks, their body goes into starvation mode and they become consumed by thoughts of food. Their food focus reaches obsessive proportions as they lose control over their food-driven thoughts.

Why does this happen? Because of *deprivation*. When our basic physical needs go unmet, these needs are intensified and scream for attention.

*Deprivation of a basic need leads to a greater intensity of that need.*

Once the people in the study were allowed the freedom to eat any amount of food they wanted, they initially appeared ravenous and consumed greater amounts than was typical for them. But then something interesting happened:

Their food consumption leveled off and their food intake returned to normal. *When they felt secure that their need was going to be met, the intensity of the need lessened!*

A similar phenomenon occurs in relationships. If your emotional need for attention and appreciation goes unmet, a state of *deprivation* will occur. Like with food, your need for attention will intensify and you will become consumed by the frustration and pain caused by the failure to receive the attention your relationship should offer.

To an outsider, you might appear “too needy” and emotionally ravenous in these moments.

In fact, if you’ve existed in a state of emotional deprivation for any significant length of time, it would make perfect sense if you became *more* demanding in an attempt to meet your basic relationship needs.

Once you feel secure that you will be given a reliable and steady stream of attention and appreciation, you’ll feel more settled and less ravenous.

### **Relationship problems: A case for men causing what overwhelms them**

If you hold the assumption that your partner is “too needy,” you are likely to retreat and withhold attention and support out of fear that your emotional resources will be depleted. This will inadvertently deprive your partner of what s/he appropriately needs from you. When this occurs, you have created a state of *emotional deprivation* that will intensify your partner’s needs.

In many cases it may be that men who hold the bottomless pit theory of emotional needs are inadvertently causing their partners to demand more emotionally.

A vicious cycle of withdrawal and pursuit follows. The person who believes in the bottomless pit theory withdraws, which causes the other partner (the one feeling deprived) to pursue him/her. This creates an atmosphere of hopelessness. To compensate, some couples develop parallel lives, on the surface appearing like a couple, but sharing little intimacy in reality.

### **Relationship Help: What to do about it**

You should do everything in your power to avoid making your partner feel emotionally deprived. Your partner’s emotional needs will not vanish if ignored and will only intensify if *you* pull away. Fulfillment of your partner’s emotional needs can only occur within the context of intimacy. Safety and trust are prerequisites for intimacy and the satisfaction of emotional needs—*withdrawing* from your partner is the antithesis to trust and intimacy.

Take the *consistent* and *necessary* steps for your partner to feel that you are emotionally available and you’ll be surprised to discover that his/her needs are not bottomless, but instead

increase *and* decrease like everyone's needs. Your steady presence will allow your partner to feel more secure and emotionally settled and your relationship will be more stable and healthier as a result.

**For example, some specific steps you might take are the following:**

~Ask specific questions about what your partner's emotional needs. Don't become complacent and assume that if nothing is said, everything must be fine.

~Show your partner that s/he can trust you by revealing more of yourself to him/her. Share personal, private thoughts and emotions on a regular basis and you'll be shaping an atmosphere of trust.

~If something is upsetting to your partner, check in with him/her regularly. Don't wait for him/her to reach a breaking point and seek you out in desperation.

~Show appreciation every chance you get. But don't make it mere lip service—really seek out things that you are grateful to your partner about, and verbalize them regularly.

~Learn to pay attention. In our fast-paced lifestyles, filled with a variety of distracting media, it's easy to forget how to focus our attention on something for long periods. When your partner is speaking to you, turn off the TV or cell phone or turn away from the computer. Make eye contact with your partner. Listen actively to both his/her words and the feelings behind the words. S/he will feel the difference.

~Get rid of the "bottomless pit" mindset. You can't "spoil" your partner by being consistently attentive to his/her emotional needs. Trade that damaging belief in for the knowledge that there are some things that people can *never* get too much of: kindness, attention, love and respect. Those are the building blocks of a healthy relationship and shouldn't be hoarded away.

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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.

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