

Are You Dealing with a ‘Withholder’?

By Rebecca Waterston, M.A., LMHCA

In private practice – New Directions Counseling in Kirkland, Washington



It is certain that you have, at one time, dealt with a person who is a ‘Withholder.’ A ‘Withholder’ is a person with whom you seldom, or never, feel that you get what you are looking for. Perhaps they will not answer your questions other than in vague terms, or they minimize your need to know – “I’ve got it handled, don’t worry about it,” they tell you. You may feel you never know what they are thinking or what they are feeling – and it leaves you oddly off-balance with them most of the time. Perhaps they give you just enough information that they claim that they have answered the question, and “that should be enough for you, there we’ve talked about it.” However, they completely ignored the need behind your question.

A Withholder can be a boss, a spouse, a lover, or a friend. You have probably experienced their presence at a party or gathering. They are the person who stands watching. If you ask a question, they may ignore you, or give you a disdainful look as they give you the shortest answer possible before moving away. If it is a person you are personally involved with, they may use subtle ways of never giving you enough, whether it be not letting you into their thoughts and feelings, or withholding affection, compliments, or even their plans.

One of the biggest ‘hooks’ a Withholder has on us...is that we end up feeling needy, and they feed on this insecurity. In fact, a person who intermittently withholds from us is more addictive than someone who withholds from us consistently. The intermittent ignore/reward is more insidious than someone who treats us badly all the time simply because it is more difficult to identify.

Withholders can withhold information, affection, compliments, financial information or plans. They may ignore your greater accomplishments but compliment the things you do for them, or they may undermine your accomplishments, purposefully invalidating your thoughts and

feelings. Although 'Withholders' can be either men or women in a relationship, it is generally more common for the withholder to be a man. Reasons for these range from our culture being more accepting of the strong-silent man, as well as the disparity between the ability of men and women to feel safe sharing emotions.

In a relationship with a "Withholder," we come to feel kind of crazy. We do not get enough information and we are left wanting. We try different tactics....perhaps if we just love the person enough or make them feel safe with us, they will open up to us. Nope. We attempt to have a meaningful conversation with our person, and if we ask again, they tell us that we have already discussed that. Why are we being "so insecure, a nag, jealous, pushy, going over the same things over and over?"

Withholding is particularly painful in a marriage or close romantic relationship. We try everything we can think of to draw the person out. We wrack our brain for new ways to approach them, to truly connect with them. Then, disappointed and feeling let down again, we try not asking at all. We try to read body language, only to find that they don't seem to have any. If we do get anything resembling true conversation with them, it may be only about the events of the day, the food we are eating for dinner, or even the weather. They seem almost to have no emotional responses, or worse can easily only express anger.

We have tried time and again to read emotions and as we look in their eyes we wonder if there truly is even anything there, or are we dealing with the shell of a person who has no inner life or world? It is a hollow, sad feeling that comes with a sense of deprivation and loneliness that is difficult to explain, let alone understand.

Perhaps our 'Withholder' withholds time from us, spending most of his, or her, time at work, out with friends, at games or other activities, or holed up for hours and days with a hobby or other interest. It can give us a direct impression that they would rather be anywhere but with us. But if we do ask about it, there is always a perfectly good reason why they can't spend more time with us. Or they turn it around on us, letting us know how out of control we are with our suspicions, our clinginess, or our 'unending' need for attention.

In more severe examples, our loved one may withhold financial information from us, telling us either that "it is taken care of," or that "we don't need to worry about that," or even accusing us of not trusting them.

Withholding is a subtle form of emotional abuse. It leaves its victim feeling crazy, out of control, desperately lonely, and sometimes jealous of the people their loved one spends time with. We may ask ourselves constantly "what is wrong with us?" Why can't we just live and let live. Why do we so often feel stressed and anxious around this person? Why do we feel so unloved, even when they disdainfully tell us "of course I love you, I'm here, aren't I?"

In extreme cases, a person who withholds, is pathologically cruel, turning the tables on us, trying to convince us that we are “making things up in our head”, that something did not happen the way we thought it did, that we are getting forgetful, letting our imaginations get away from us, or that we are acting “crazy.” This destructive tactic is called ‘gaslighting,’ a manipulative ploy to create doubt in our minds, to invalidate our feelings or perceptions, or to sow seeds of doubt in us or within members of a group. The abuser’s goal is to make targets question their own memory, perception or even sanity. In short, it is a constant emotional diminishing of another person to render their targeted victim weaker and less capable while the gaslighting person feel stronger or more in control.

This form of emotional abuse often leaves us wondering how we can either change the situation or learn to see things “the right way.” What is wrong with us? Why can’t we just accept things the way they are? Why does everything seem bizarre somehow? Why can’t we find the right way to relate to this person? Why do we feel like we are living with the enemy instead of with someone who claims to, or is supposed to, love us?

How can we handle a Withholder? If they are withholding financial information from us, separate your financials from your abuser’s in every way possible. Remove yourself from joint credit cards and open your own checking and savings accounts. The National Domestic Violence Hotline has a “Financial Tips for Victims and Survivors,” online. If you use direct deposit from your work, make sure it is in your name alone, and that it is sent only to your own separate account. For more information on how to deal with this problem, you can call the National Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 and learn about financial assistance available in your area.

One of the main keys to dealing with a “Withholder” is to learn how to detach. Detaching means: “the state of being objective or aloof, disinterested, open-minded, or impartial,” (Oxford Dictionary, 2017). Perhaps a better way to describe detachment is to learn to put aside any expectations of another person. If we have no expectations of them, we are less affected by their actions or lack of reactions and actions.

it is important for you to find validation in other areas and with other people. Join a group with common interests, make plans and follow through with them without asking or telling your Withholder. If a Withholder keeps information or thoughts and feelings from you, go on with your own life. Make your own life happen without counting on or depending upon them to go with you, to talk, plan, or invest time together.

There is nothing that you can do about changing another person. They are either purposefully cruel, or at best, thoughtless. Unless they can see their own shortcomings, you will not be able to plead, change tactics, ignore, or teach them to live any differently. If it is particularly painful, take a walk, take a drive, go out to dinner with a friend. If your Withholder is on the edge of

abusive, you may have to consider whether it is worth your peace of mind to stay with him or her.

If your Withholder keeps information about his or her whereabouts from you, you will not be able to control when or what information you get about this. If you have made plans together and he doesn't show up go to your event, dinner and follow through with your plans by yourself. Sometimes after a few times of doing this (and only if your Withholder is just being irresponsible rather than purposefully cruel), this action may begin to wake him up to the fact that you will continue to live your own life, regardless of his being there or not being there.

If he is using withholding, which is a form of emotional abuse, it would be wise to do an inventory on paper to see if there are other areas in which he is being purposefully cruel or emotionally abusive. There are numerous online sources for how to deal with emotionally abusive people.

The most difficult area of dealing with this person is in us learning that how they act is not our fault, is not within our power to control, and is not a reflection of our own worth and value. We have to learn how to value ourselves and if our loved one is purposefully being cruel, we may have to learn how to mentally hold our palm out, telling ourselves, "this is not about me. This is his/her problem. I will not let it ruin my life, my plans, my friendships, my safety, my well-being, my state of mine or my trust in myself."

References:

Oxford Dictionary, 2017. Oxford University Press.