

A FREE GUIDE FROM ASCALON COUNSELING

# Breaking the Pursue-Withdraw Cycle

*Understanding the pattern that keeps couples stuck, and how to start shifting it*

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## INTRODUCTION

# You are not the problem. The pattern is.

Most couples who reach out to me don't say, "We have a pursue-withdraw cycle." They say things like: "We keep having the same fight." Or: "We can never resolve anything." Or, most painfully: "I don't know if we even like each other anymore."

The topic changes. The feelings underneath it don't. One person pushes in. The other pulls away. The harder one pursues, the further the other retreats. And the cycle runs, sometimes for years, before anyone names it.

This guide won't fix your relationship. That's not what a PDF is for. What it will do is give you a map: a way to see the pattern clearly, understand what's driving it, and take a few concrete steps before or alongside working with a therapist.

### **A note on this guide**

The pursue-withdraw cycle is a clinical concept from Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), developed by Dr. Sue Johnson and rooted in John Bowlby's attachment theory. A 2016 meta-analysis of EFT outcome research found that couples receiving EFT showed significantly greater improvement than control groups, with effect sizes in the moderate-to-large range, though as with any therapy, individual outcomes vary and no approach can guarantee a specific result (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). This guide draws on that framework.

## PART ONE

# What the Cycle Looks Like

The pursue-withdraw cycle is a negative interaction pattern in which one partner repeatedly initiates contact, demands resolution, or escalates emotionally, while the other repeatedly withdraws, goes quiet, or shuts down. Both partners are responding to real pain. Neither is the villain.

## The Pursuer

The pursuer feels disconnected and scared. They want closeness, reassurance, resolution: something that confirms the relationship is okay. But what comes out often looks like criticism, complaint, or emotional pressure. "You never open up to me." "You always shut down." "Why won't you just talk to me?"

From the inside, the pursuer isn't attacking. They're reaching. But under stress, that reaching often becomes grasping, and the withdrawer hears it as an assault.

## The Withdrawer

The withdrawer feels overwhelmed and inadequate. The emotional intensity of their partner's approach registers as danger: a signal that they've already failed, that nothing they do will be enough. So they do what makes sense: they go quiet. They leave the room. They offer flat, one-word answers. They wait for it to blow over.

From the inside, the withdrawer isn't abandoning. They're protecting themselves from overwhelm, and sometimes their partner from an escalating conflict. But the pursuer experiences that silence as confirmation of their worst fear: I don't matter to you.

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*“Neither partner is the villain. Both are reacting to real pain. But the cycle itself becomes the enemy.”*

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## How It Escalates

Here's the painful mechanics: each partner's coping strategy makes the other's fear worse. The more the pursuer pushes, the more overwhelmed the withdrawer becomes, and the further they pull back. The further the withdrawer pulls back, the more desperate the pursuer becomes, and the harder they push.

It's not a communication breakdown. It's an attachment alarm system running on a loop. And because it's driven by fear rather than logic, you cannot think your way out of it in the moment.

## PART TWO

# Why It's So Hard to Break

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The pursue-withdraw cycle is one of the most stubborn patterns in couples therapy, not because the people in it are damaged, but because it is deeply adaptive. It makes sense.

## It's an Attachment Response

Attachment theory holds that humans are wired to seek closeness to important others when threatened, a system Bowlby (1969/1982) described as fundamental to survival across the lifespan, not just in childhood. When a close relationship feels unsafe, the nervous system responds much as it does to physical danger. Johnson (2004) extended this framework to adult romantic bonds, arguing that attachment needs are central to how couples fight, repair, and heal.

The pursuer's protest behavior (escalation, criticism, clinging) is an attachment alarm going off. The withdrawer's shutdown is a different expression of the same alarm, a freeze response when fight or flight feels impossible. Both are trying to survive the threat of disconnection.

### **The attachment paradox**

The person you most need comfort from is also the person triggering your alarm. This is why the cycle is so disorienting: the natural move toward your partner for safety keeps producing the opposite of safety.

## It Happens Below the Words

Couples often believe their conflicts are about the content: money, parenting, chores, sex. But the content is usually just the trigger. The real fight is about the relationship itself: Are you there for me? Do I matter to you? Can I count on you?

As long as both partners are focused on the content, on who is right about the dishes, they'll miss the emotional undercurrent that's actually running the interaction. This is why the same argument keeps happening. The surface topic gets resolved (or dropped), but the underlying question never gets answered.

## Each Partner's Fear Confirms the Other's

The pursuer's deepest fear is usually something like: I don't matter. I'm alone. No one will really be there for me.

The withdrawer's deepest fear is usually something like: I'm inadequate. I always fail the people I love. I'm not enough.

The cruel irony: the pursuer's escalation confirms the withdrawer's fear that they're failing. And the withdrawer's silence confirms the pursuer's fear that they don't matter. Each person is trying to protect themselves from their worst fear, and accidentally activating it in their partner.

### PART THREE

## What You Can Do Right Now

You cannot do full EFT on your own. The deep restructuring of emotional responses and attachment patterns is therapeutic work that requires a skilled clinician. What you can do is start seeing the cycle clearly, which is itself the first step toward changing it.

### 01

#### **Name the cycle, not the person**

Instead of "You always shut down" or "You never stop criticizing," try: "I think we're in our cycle right now." When the pattern, not your partner, becomes the identified problem, you're suddenly on the same side against it.

### 02

#### **Identify which role you typically play**

Most people have a primary role (pursuer or withdrawer), though roles can switch based on topic or context. Knowing your pattern means you can catch yourself earlier. The pursuer can ask: Is this protest behavior, or am I actually expressing a need? The withdrawer can ask: Am I protecting myself, or am I leaving my partner alone with their fear?

## 03

### **Wait before you try to repair**

Research on emotional regulation suggests that when we're in a state of high activation, our capacity for empathy, perspective-taking, and clear communication is significantly reduced (Siegel, 1999). Repair attempts made in the middle of the cycle often make things worse. Agree to return to the conversation when both of you are regulated. Then actually return.

## 04

### **Get curious about what's underneath**

Pursuit almost always has longing underneath it. Withdrawal almost always has fear. The next time you notice the cycle starting, try to get one layer deeper than the surface complaint. What are you actually afraid of? What do you actually need? You don't have to say it yet. Just notice it.

## 05

### **Choose one moment to do it differently**

You don't need to fix the whole pattern. You need to disrupt it once. A pursuer who, in one heated moment, says "I'm scared I'm losing you" instead of escalating. That's a different move. A withdrawer who, instead of going silent, says "I need 20 minutes, but I will come back." That's a different move. One different move changes what's possible next.

## PART FOUR

# When to Seek Help

The pursue-withdraw cycle is responsive to therapy. EFT was specifically designed to target attachment-based patterns like this one, and the research base is meaningful. Johnson (2004) describes EFT as typically conducted over 8–20 sessions, though the actual course of treatment varies considerably depending on the couple, the severity of distress, and other factors. Research suggests many couples experience significant improvement. Therapy is not a guarantee, and outcomes depend on engagement, fit with the therapist, and circumstances outside the therapy

room.

Consider reaching out for professional support if any of the following apply:

- The same fight has been happening for months or years without resolution
- Emotional or physical intimacy has significantly decreased
- One or both partners has started to withdraw from the relationship emotionally
- Contempt, criticism, defensiveness, or stonewalling are present regularly
- You've tried to change the pattern on your own and haven't been able to
- One or both partners is considering whether to stay in the relationship

#### **A note on timing**

Research by Gottman and Silver (1999) found that couples waited an average of six years after serious relationship problems began before seeking help. Earlier intervention tends to mean less entrenched patterns, but there is no point of no return. The willingness to look at the cycle honestly matters more than how long it has been running.

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*Citations are provided for informational transparency. This guide is not a substitute for professional consultation with a licensed clinician.*

## Ready to work on this together?

I'm Jared Tawney, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist serving couples and individuals across Washington and Idaho via telehealth. I specialize in Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and Gottman Method for couples, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for individuals.

A free 15-minute phone consultation gives us both the chance to see if working together makes sense. No obligation.

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