

Self-Defeating Patterns Can Develop While Trying to Re-establish Intimacy

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

When couples are unaware of their emotional baggage and intimacy issues, they can create patterns where they engage in a perpetual, self-reinforcing, and circular behavior. Experts have described this self-defeating interaction pattern as "pursue/distance" and "demand/withdraw." I call it "the Pac-Man Dance." In this pattern, one person habitually pursues emotionally and perhaps physically, and the other distances. Pursuit is usually about reclaiming a sense of emotional security in the relationship. The quest typically continues until the pursuer decides they are getting nothing for their investment and begins to distance. As this happens, the "distancer," who looks like they are not engaged in the relationship, begins to pursue.

Many couples, if not most, engage in a more subtle version of this continuing pattern. The dynamics become evident during a relationship crisis, when the relationship may be in crisis or imminent danger of collapse. This pattern can be a roadblock to true intimacy, even though intimacy is the target of the "pursuer."

Individuals who do not know how to talk about relationship issues, including their need for closeness or distance, tend to act out their feelings somehow. Unfortunately a typical pattern is where partners who want closeness communicate that desire through demanding and critical behavior. The other partner is hard-pressed to determine that the complaining partner is seeking closeness.

There is plenty of room for misunderstanding and miscommunication in couple communication. In couples' attempts to solve issues in their home or family, many may be working on different concerns and not realize it.

Regular events take on "relationship meanings" when you have difficulty communicating your wants, needs, and feelings. Consider this scenario: one spouse becomes noticeably upset when their partner arrives home fifteen minutes after work. The upset partner desires more closeness, interpreting the slight delay as evidence that their significant other prefers less intimacy, leading them to believe they are being avoided.

Instead of openly communicating their need for more time together, the distressed partner resorts to nagging their spouse to finish work earlier, to be more assertive, and to leave the office "on time." However, the increased nagging increases the frequency of arriving home later. This behavior takes on an aggressive and passive-aggressive dance.

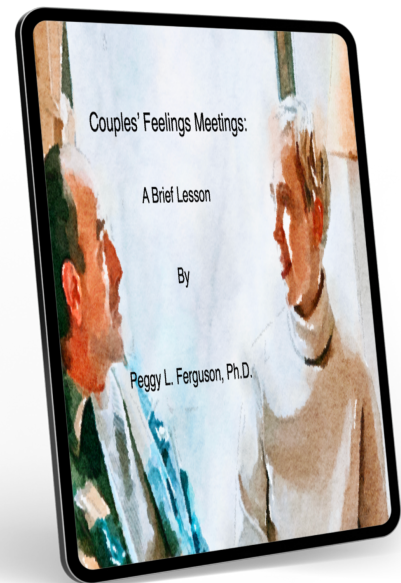
Although these patterns are difficult to see and break, they can be ended. It is hard for couples to recognize the pattern because they are invested in their own perception of the events. They are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the other person is at fault and that if the other person changed, they, too, would change.

As each waits for the other partner to change, they both become more and more stuck in the pattern.

This pattern can be corrected, and intimacy can be (re-)established when each partner can acknowledge and express their wants, needs, and feelings. When they can identify that they have a difference in their need for closeness at any given moment and that it is merely a difference and not something "bad," they can interrupt the pattern. In the relationship, each person must accept themselves as worthy of love and trust that they are loved.

The "secret" to gaining the ability to be genuinely intimate is to become comfortable with different levels of need for closeness vs. distance at any given moment in time. When people are able to tolerate the differences in their needs for closeness as simply "difference," without value judgment, and without developing a negative "theory" to explain those differences, they can interrupt the pattern and create comfort that allows for the growth of true intimacy.

Developing self-defeating patterns while trying to re-establish intimacy illustrates the need for a proactive approach to fostering deeper connections. "Couples Feelings Meetings: A Brief Lesson" offers a structured pathway for couples to chart their course through complex emotions to strengthen the bonds of intimacy. This lesson empowers partners to communicate purposefully, setting the stage for authentic connection and understanding. Download your guide to couples' feelings meetings to break free from old, destructive patterns and cultivate a relationship grounded in emotional intimacy.



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