

Escaping the Pac-Man Dance: A Blueprint for Relationship Liberation

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Intimacy and connection are not a static, fixed entity. Relationships are dynamic and systemic, with each person's actions impacting and influencing the others'. The need for closeness vs. distance is often acted out in a choreography of emotions and behaviors that I call the "Pac-Man Dance." This choreography has also been dubbed the "pursuer/distancer" or "demand/withdraw" pattern by other scholars and clinicians (e.g., Lerner, 1985; Gottman, 1999.)

The dance goes something like this: One partner needs more closeness. They require reassurance that they are loved, important, and valued. They crave more attention and gestures that meet their need for closeness. A previous relationship may have created a high alert for evidence that their partner will abandon them. The other person, in general, has less need for closeness. Their previous experience in a romantic or close relationship has left them feeling smothered, overwhelmed, or used. Whatever the reason, their filters have them on alert for unreasonable demands for closeness. Both people value the relationship, but they want to avoid experiencing what happened in old relationships where they did not get their needs met or the outcome was not what they wanted.

The dance is about getting your needs met in the relationship. The person with a higher need for closeness wants to know that their investments in the relationship will pay off. They have criteria to assess that question. The criteria are personally meaningful for them. Our filters largely determine the meaning we give to a situation. When the object of our affection works more hours than we think it is reasonable to work, we want to know why they are doing that. If we feel uncertain about whether we are loved or valued, the theory we write to explain "overworking" may involve these: "If you loved me, you would spend more time with me." "If you loved me,

you wouldn't go to sleep so early." The "If you loved me list" could go on and on. The person writing this theory also tests it by asking for the closeness they need. Or at least they think they are asking for closeness. Nagging, hostility, criticism, pleading, and trying to direct the other person's behavior often occurs instead when people have a hard time expressing directly what they want and need.

Of course, the other person, who has different life experiences and thus different filters, perceives this whole dance differently. The theory they write about the other person's pursuing or demanding attention is that "you are trying to control me." "You don't give me credit for anything I do for you and this relationship (including working 60 hours a week." "You act like you hate me by not letting me get any sleep." The theories continue and don't match the other person's perception of the relationship events. Each person believes that their theories are the correct ones. They argue about who is right or wrong and never really get to the problem-solving. Each person thinks something is wrong with the other person because their need for closeness vs. distance is different at any given time than their own. Both partners are trying to get their needs met and believe the other person is deliberately trying to get in the way. Each person is wearing blinders and can only identify the problem in one way, which dictates how the problem should be solved. They are each defining the problem and the solution differently.

More subjectively, one person's need for closeness vs. distance is rarely the same as the other person's. The difference is just difference. It is not right or wrong, good or bad. It is just a difference.

The pursuing/distancing dance becomes a mesmerizing cycle, each subsequent dance move triggered by the other person's move. Each person blames their partner's actions for their own subsequent behavior. This dance is ongoing as each person tries to be in the relationship and get their needs met simultaneously. It is usually a subtle dance, only detectable once one person decides to do something else because their behavior is not getting them what they want. They typically try the opposite of what they have been doing. The pursuer will stop pursuing or

will distance. The distancer will keep distancing until the distance between the two people gets too great for their comfort, and then they will begin to pursue. The previously pursuing partner, encouraged by the increasing closeness, will start to pursue again. The distancer, again perceiving the closeness as too close for comfort, will begin to distance again.

Unraveling these intricate patterns proves challenging, akin to decoding a complex dance routine. Couples, entrenched in their perspectives, find it difficult to recognize the dance for what it is. Convinced that the fault lies with the other, they wait for a partner's behavioral change that never materializes, perpetuating the cycle.

It's a self-defeating pattern that subtly weaves itself into the fabric of relationships. Like a hidden waltz, it only reveals its complexity during times of crisis, threatening the very foundation of the connection. This intricate interplay often acts as a barricade to genuine intimacy, the true aim of the pursuer or demander. Each person wants to be themselves and to be accepted for themselves. That includes showing love and care according to their love language.

When partners understand that difference is just "difference" and that the theories of not being loved or the partner trying to control them are inaccurate, they can relax into the relationship and feel loved and supported by their partner.

If, instead of struggling to articulate their desires for closeness or space, they can say directly what they want and need, they can better hear what the other person wants and needs and are more likely to grant more of their open, honest, direct requests. At times, individuals may realize that the behavior they seek from their partner, considering it as "evidence" supporting a particular theory about being loved or wanted, is not within their partner's repertoire. Upon closer examination, they may identify alternative behaviors that convey the meaning they seek, aligning with their partner's love language.

Breaking free from this dance requires directly acknowledging and expressing wants, needs, and feelings. Partners must recognize the subtle

differences in their desires for closeness, realizing that these variations are not inherently "bad" but merely differences. The key lies in interrupting the pattern by accepting oneself as deserving of love and trusting in the love within the relationship.

The secret to achieving true intimacy lies in embracing the ebb and flow of closeness and distance. Partners, comfortable with these differences, can interrupt the dance without judgment, fostering an environment where true intimacy can flourish and grow. It's a journey where partners learn to waltz with the nuances of each other's needs, creating a harmonious and enduring connection. The Pac-Man Dance fades away, replaced by a more enchanting rhythm that celebrates the beauty of individuality within the dance of togetherness.



**Communication Skills 101: Using "I" Messages for Positive Interactions
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

As we unravel the intricate dance of pursuit and distance in relationships, it becomes evident that effective communication is the key to breaking free from self-defeating patterns. Understanding the nuances of emotional expression and acknowledging the dance's intricacies lays the foundation for healthier connections. Now, let's seamlessly transition to "Communication Skills 101: Using 'I' Messages for Positive Interactions." This Brief Lesson serves as the perfect complement, offering practical insights into transforming communication. By replacing accusatory "You" messages with empowering "I" messages, you'll not only break free from blame-focused interactions but also enhance empathy and problem-solving. Together, these resources provide a comprehensive toolkit for fostering meaningful connections and creating lasting relationship harmony. This is a digital download available immediately.