

STOP YOUR
**REPETITIVE
FIGHT**
FOREVER

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Stop Your Repetitive Fight Forever



If you're married or in a long-term relationship, I have an important question for you:

Can you describe the endless fight you have with your spouse?

It's the repetitive argument or disagreement, or perhaps the same old complaint that never gets resolved. I'm sure you have tried to change this dynamic, but nothing seems to work. Maybe you are divorced, and you think back to the endless fight you used to have and wonder why the relationship seemed so difficult.

We have asked thousands of couples the same question and with some reflection, everyone has an answer. Milan and I asked Heather and Garrett this question last week during a marriage intensive: "tell us about the repetitive fight in your relationship; the frustrating dynamic that happens over and over. It may be the same subject or the script you seem to follow no matter what the issue."

"That's easy, said Heather. Garrett doesn't make me a priority." "I've told him repeatedly that this is what I need."

"I've tried," sighed Garrett, "but it's never enough for her. I'm trying to fill a bottomless pit. If I don't do it just right, I get the angry Heather."


"You never remember what I ask for," interrupted Heather. "Besides, if you loved me, you would know what I need."

Garrett rolled his eyes and sighed. "I don't think we are ever going to get past this. It's been an issue from the beginning of our marriage and I'm tired of trying."

Just like Garrett and Heather, every couple has a core pattern. It may take the form of complaints voiced again and again, or it may be a repetitive pattern of interaction, regardless of the topic. Whatever the case, once the core pattern is triggered, a couple begins a wearisome dance from which they can't seem to find resolution or lasting change. And that's where it often ends. Many couples end up divorcing, convinced they married the wrong person. Eventually, they remarry and are shocked to discover another core pattern emerging. It may be the same one they experienced in the first marriage, or the dynamic may change with a new spouse, but the core pattern will be just as destructive and exasperating.

The core complaints about our spouse most often come out of this dynamic. We can ask the question another way: "What bugs you the most about your spouse?" Your answer will likely connect to this core dynamic. In our own marriage, Milan and I were getting beat up by our own core pattern. For the first fifteen years of our marriage, I had one thing that bothered me the most about Milan: "You're too needy and you hover around me. I need space. Quit asking me if I'm Ok. I've told you time and again, *I'm fine!*"

Of course, Milan had his own criticism about me. "You are distant and don't give me enough affection." Even when we were not verbalizing these grievances, they were lurking right under the surface causing tension and discontent. Like most couples, we had no idea why this pattern was so hard to beat. Where did it come from? Why was it so persistent? I tried to be more affectionate, but it was robotic, and I knew it wasn't coming from my heart. Why was it so hard to give Milan what he wanted? Milan tried to give me space, but he watched from across the room, trying to figure me out. Why was he so uncomfortable with space?



These pages could be the beginning of deep change in your most significant relationships. Milan and I (Kay) want to share what changed our marriage in deep and lasting ways. These concepts are the core of what we teach and write about. The principles have a foundation of scientific research, but most importantly these ideas can improve your marriage or any other relationship. As counselors, we have helped thousands of couples. We can give you three steps to understand and end the endless fight.


First, a little background so you understand the science behind these concepts and interventions and then I'll share the steps.

I (Kay) was working with kids who were fostered or adopted, and my supervisor told me to read some articles about attachment theory. This was back in 1994 and early attachment of children to their parents was a topic of research that originated 60 years earlier by a man named John Bowlby. Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, was attempting to understand the intense distress experienced by infants and toddlers who had been separated from their parents due to hospitalization or war. Bowlby was a compassionate man and he felt he could learn from observing these young children. He also noticed these kids rebuff their parents when reunited with their parents. Why was this happening?

Parents were not allowed to visit during a child's hospitalization in the 1950's. Over a period of weeks, Bowlby observed that separated children went through three predictable phases: protest, despair, and finally detachment. Upon separation, toddlers protested by crying. When parents didn't appear, children became more despairing, and their cries were agonizing to hear. Finally, these little ones gave up and stopped crying. They became listless and unresponsive. Nurses and doctors assumed the toddlers had adjusted and were getting use to the hospital, but they were wrong. Rather, they were detached and resigned. Remember, separation causes a three-step process in the child of protest, despair, detachment. When children returned home, they remained detached, avoided their parents and were unresponsive to attempts made by the parents to connect. Parents who could tolerate the rejection and stayed engaged found trust could be rebuilt over time. Other parents who felt unwanted rejected the child in return.

I know...this is getting scientific but please, keep reading. Already, this research on attachment styles has revealed that the core patterns you and your spouse experience in your marriage are driven by the attachment patterns you experienced with your parents during your early years. This means **your marriage problems didn't start in your marriage. They began before you ever met.** Intriguing, right? Let's dive into a bit more research and then I promise we'll share how this research impacts you!

Mary Ainsworth expanded on his ideas and observed three attachment patterns in children that were observable by the time they were 18 months old. She named these three attachment styles based on the children's patterns of interaction with their parents: **secure attachment, avoidant attachment, or resistant attachment.** Then, in 1986, Mary Main, together with Jude Cassidy, introduced a new infant attachment classification called **disorganized or disoriented.** This category described a child who experienced dangerous, traumatic experiences early on. I know we just named a lot of attachment styles but don't worry — we will describe them in more detail in a bit.



For years, these concepts were applied to work with children, but the field of adult attachment styles was a topic that was just beginning to be researched. In the late 1980's, Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver furthered researched how early attachment theory impacted adult relationships. Hazan and Shaver noticed that interactions between **adults** were similar to interactions from the past between children and caregivers. While all this reading helped my work with children, it had a far greater impact on my personal life as an adult. As I read about avoidant attachment in children, I had a startling realization: it described *me as an adult*. It explained my interactions with Milan and why I felt and behaved the way I did in my relationship with him.

This realization led me to read everything I could find on attachment research. While adult attachment was a new field of research in the early 1990's, I was beginning to understand adult behaviors through the lens of early attachment. I begin to recognize how early childhood experiences in our homes imprinted us with an attachment style (or Love Style) that determines our expectations about relationships and forms how we react and respond in adult relationships. I had never considered my early life as having anything to do with the frustrating pattern in my marriage. Yet, that very core pattern was the result of my attachment style colliding with Milan's attachment style. Today, after forty-nine years of marriage and thirty years of experience helping couples, Milan and I would define marriage as *two colliding histories*. The problem is: you cannot change what you don't understand. **With a diagnosis, change is possible.** We love getting to share this discovery with couples, watch them breathe a sigh of relief and begin to feel hope again.

If you read attachment research, you will learn these styles are not personality or temperament traits. Your Love Style isn't something you were born with. It is developed early on as your parents interact with you. Now let's pause right here and get clear on something: this isn't about blaming our parents for our current struggles. The reality is our parents have strengths and weaknesses and both had an impact on us. There is no perfect parent, and most parents do the best they can. Our goal here is not to *blame* but to *explain* how we were imprinted. Then we can decide what we want to keep, and what we want to discard through the process of change and growth.

Your Love Style (attachment style) is largely formed before you can speak. You can think of these patterns as a series of downloads into your brain that determine how you respond in relationships from childhood into adulthood. What we believe and how we react in relationships is not always a conscious choice, rather it's a programmed perspective and an automatic pattern of behavior that is surprisingly predictable. Think of these love styles as unseen injuries that prevent close connection, cause different kinds of reactivity, and make resolving conflict almost impossible. These styles are not gender specific. Both males and females fit all different styles. Where you land depends on your experience with your parents, not your gender.

Ok, now that you know the research behind attachment theory let me describe each Love Style from our book, *How We Love*. As you read through these Love Styles, think about what Style best describes you? Which Style explains your spouse?

Secure Attachment:

A securely attached child is the outcome when parent(s) respond consistently (not perfectly) to a child's distress in a way that provides relief from physical and emotional situations that are overwhelming. Consistent comfort and support help a child learn others can be trusted and depended upon. Over time, the child easily turns to parents for comfort during times of distress and learns people are a resource to help maintain emotional balance. Ideally, parents build on this foundation of safe connection and set appropriate limits, so children learn to take turns, share, and accept restrictions and boundaries. A lot happens in the first five years of life. That's why they are called the formative years! Many memories of comfort build neural networks in the brain that help a child know how to return to a calm place after a stressful situation throughout the rest of their lives. Do you have memories of comfort from childhood? Your experiences of comfort, or lack thereof, will determine how you respond to stress as an adult.

There is no perfect parent and most of us had both good and bad experiences growing up. What can go wrong that might prevent secure attachment? What happens if emotional awareness and comfort were insufficient, or parents set limits that were harsh, inconsistent, or absent? Likely, you will relate to one of the broken attachment styles below. These exist on a continuum from mild to extreme.

Find out what your Love Style is by taking our online quiz at this link: <https://howwelove.com/love-style-quiz/>

The Avoider Love Style:



Childhood Home: Avoiders grow up with parents whose focus is on tasks and mastery with little to no emotional connection or deep, personal conversations. Comfort is not offered, and a child learns to be independent and take care of themselves. Being responsible is a high value in these homes. Children learn not to show emotions and over time are no longer aware of feelings.

Adult Belief of the Avoider: "Life works best if I depend on myself and chart my own path."

How Avoiders handle stress: Flee, detach, isolate, get busy and distract themselves.

How Avoiders act in adult relationships:

- Self-reliant and independent. Learned early on not to need much from others.
- Dismissive of emotions in themselves and others. Cannot identify any emotions.
- Low empathy. Did not get much comfort as kids so avoiders are not able to value comfort or know how to give nurturing care.
- Task focused, want to fix problems quickly rather than talk about issues.
- Won't ask for help. Views neediness as weak, pathetic.
- Avoids conflict and cannot describe their feelings or needs.
- Makes decisions without consulting or getting feedback.

Are you married to an Avoider? If you're married to an Avoider, review the complaints below and see if they sound familiar? Are they part of what moves you into complaining or reacting in the same ways over and over?

- I don't feel seen or needed by my spouse.
- My spouse feels distant and doesn't connect to me.
- My spouse avoids talking about problems.
- My spouse is uncomfortable when I feel emotional.

The Pleaser Love Style:



Childhood Home: During childhood, the pleaser takes the role of the “good kid” to reduce stress in the family or to compensate for a wild or disabled sibling. This child may have taken the role of a parentified child or substitute spouse if the parents had a difficult marriage or divorce or were not responsible in caring for the children.

Adult Belief of the Pleaser: “I can keep others from being upset if I'm really good and helpful.”

How Pleasers handle stress: Pleasers are anxious if others are stressed or upset. They freeze in the face of anger and have trouble communicating. Pleasers then do nice things to make others happy again

How Pleasers act in adult relationships:

- Focused on others and is nice to keep everyone happy.
- Feels calm if everyone is happy, feels anxious if others are upset.
- Needs a lot of approval.
- Worries a lot but may not be aware of anxiety.
- Hovers and stays close. Comfortable with proximity and uncomfortable when alone.
- Takes the emotional temperature of spouse to make sure they aren't mad. Often asks, “Are you OK?” “Are you upset?”
- Good at knowing what others want but have no idea what they really want or need.
- Over apologizes to avoid conflict or anger.
- Lies, or minimizes to avoid conflict.
- Difficulty saying “No” or setting limits and may be overcommitted or taken advantage of as a result.

Are you married to a Pleaser? If so, do any of these complaints sound familiar? Are they part of what moves you into complaining or reacting in the same ways again and again?

- My spouse asks me over and over if I'm OK.
- My spouse makes me feel guilty if I want time away.
- My spouse is overcommitted because they cannot say, “No.”
- Sometimes I feel smothered by my spouse.

- I don't respect my spouse and sometimes they do things to please me that I don't want or need.
- My spouse minimizes problems.

The Vacillator Love Style: (Ambivalent or Preoccupied)



Childhood: Growing up, vacillators experienced inconsistent, sporadic connection and longed for more connection than they received. Waiting for the availability of the parents to connect left the vacillator feeling abandoned and unseen.

Adult Belief of the Vacillator: “If I can find an ideal soulmate, I’ll never feel alone or forgotten again or suffer like I did as a kid.”

How the Vacillator handles stress: When stressed, vacillators ruminate about problems. When anxiety peaks about a lack of connection vacillators get angry, protest, and complain. The vacillator may detach for a while and mope.

How the Vacillator acts in relationships:

- Idealistic; high hopes to avoid disappointment. Often disappointed because spouse does not meet idealistic expectations. Wants connection without being vulnerable.
- Moody. Swings between “all good” when they feel happy to cynical and “all bad” when disappointed.
- Expresses anger rather than more vulnerable feelings underneath the anger.
- Preoccupied with relational closeness and distance. Feels abandoned when there is distance.
- Ruminates on past hurts and future hopes believing they can get their spouse to be all they need.
- Crusader: Sees what’s wrong in life and charges ahead to make changes.
- Pleases spouse to make connection happen, protests when expectations for connection are not met and detaches to lick their wounds. Eventually reengages without resolution.
- Reacts defensively to criticism and has difficulty apologizing. This is because they have high standards for themselves and feel shame when they fall short. This is often an internal battle that is hidden from others.
- Sees others as having the problems and is unaware of how their history sets them up for disappointment.

Are you married to a Vacillator? If so, do any of these complaints sound familiar? Are they part of what moves you into complaining or reacting in the same ways again and again?

- No matter how hard I try, it’s never enough.
- My spouse wants connection, but their anger drives me away.
- I feel like I’m walking on eggshells. I know the anger is coming but I cannot predict when the blow up will happen.
- My spouse is too moody.

The Controller and Victim Love Style: (Chaotic, Disorganized)

Childhood Home: For both the Controller and Victim, childhood was traumatic. Parents were dangerous, neglectful, abusive and/or unpredictable. We divide this category into Controller and Victim. Feistier kids react with anger as they get older and become controlling to secure predictability. Quieter kids can become victims over time as they learned to stay under the radar and tolerate the intolerable. Many people who experienced difficult childhoods relate to all the styles as they tried different ways to cope. Addictions are common in this category because there is so much childhood pain, thus stress feels overwhelming. These kids experience lots of distress with no comfort or solutions.

The Controller Love Style



Adult Belief: “Control or be controlled. Control makes me safe and makes my world predictable. Expressing anger is the only way I know how to keep the control I need.”

How the Controller handles stress: A lack of predictability or noncompliance will set off a controller’s intimidating anger.

How the Controller acts in relationships:

- Uses anger and intimidation to maintain control and stay in charge. (This is what was modeled to them when they were children).
- Anger is about a lack of compliance, not a lack of connection.
- Detached and unaware of any vulnerable feelings as vulnerability was experienced as humiliation growing up.
- Minimize and laugh about horrible childhood events. May lack memory from some periods of childhood.
- In some cases, they may be violent or emotionally abusive. If the controller feels shame, they will expel it onto others.
- Overly rigid or may be chaotic and all over the map.
- May be jealous and possessive.
- Everyone in the family is afraid and anxious about the next outburst.
- May apologize if loss is a threat, but nothing changes and the cycle repeats.

Are you married to a Controller? If so, do any of these complaints sound familiar? Are they part of what moves you into complaining or reacting in the same ways again and again?

- No matter how hard I try, it’s never enough to stop the anger.
- If I’m honest, I’m afraid of my spouse.
- I feel like I’m walking on eggshells. I know the anger is coming but I cannot predict when the blow up will happen.
- I feel trapped and am afraid to leave.

The Victim Love Style:



Adult Belief: “I am flawed and unworthy of love. I get what I deserve and trying to protect myself is dangerous.”

How the Victim handles stress:

The Victim rarely fights back. When stressed, they numb out, use substances, or dissociate. Dissociation is a learned coping mechanism during childhood where a person involuntarily disconnects from their body and present surroundings to block intense, unresolved, repetitive traumatic stress. Victims may also experience a freeze response where they feel confused, unable to think or form coherent thoughts.

How the Victim acts in relationships:

- Unable to stand up to others for fear of being hurt or abused.
- Lacks esteem and a sense of personhood.
- Feels unworthy and unlovable.
- Unable to protect children from an angry dominating spouse.
- Finds it useless to have wants or needs.

Are you married to a victim? If so, do any of these complaints sound familiar? Are they part of what moves you into complaining or reacting in the same ways again and again?

- If my spouse would listen and do it my way, I wouldn't be angry.
- My spouse ignores me when I ask things to be done a certain way.
- My spouse does things behind my back so, of course, I'm angry.

Are you getting a glimpse of the root of your *Endless Fight*?

I'm sure this is as eye-opening for you as it was for Milan and me. No matter what two love styles you combine in a relationship, they create a surprisingly predictable Core Pattern. The collision of two attachment histories is what fuels that frustrating, repetitive cycle in your marriage. It's often the root of the problem and, if we address the foundation of the problem, change can be transforming and permanent. Change requires hard work and practice, but it's easier to put the effort into your relationships if you follow a path that can lead to a great outcome.

Now we are ready to explain those 3 Steps I promised: Here is an overview, and then I will describe each step in more detail.

Overview of the Three Steps:

1. Rethink:

The first step of growth is to look back at your history and identify and own your attachment style and work on the growth goals for your particular style. Pick the style you most commonly display in the relationship you most want to change. The goal is to grow out of your wounded attachment style and develop the traits of a secure connector. Any adult can earn a secure attachment. You can take the love style quiz at howwelove.com to get started.

2. Recognize:

The second step of growth is to identify your core pattern. Once you know your love style and the love style of your spouse you can begin to understand what happens when those love styles collide. Discovering the childhood wounds that created the broken attachment style will increase compassion for yourself and your spouse. Looking back, Milan and I didn't know what we didn't know! Once we understood our core pattern and its roots we could begin to repair and grow.

3. Repair:

The third step is to learn to take a trip around the Comfort Circle. Learning to complete the comfort circle is a game changer. Listening is a key skill many of us don't learn growing up. In most cases listening skills are taught by asking one partner to reflect what they heard their partner say before responding. We slow the process way down and have each person learn to stay in the listening role all the way around the circle.

Now, let's expand and define each step in more detail.

Step 1: Rethink:

Identify Your Love Style and Commit to Growth. Here are a few growth goals for each style to get you started:

Avoiders:

- Use the List of Soul Words every day and look for words that describe your inner world.
- Put words to your internal experiences and learn to share your feelings with others.
- Ask for help instead of being the lone ranger.
- Ask others about their feelings and just listen without trying to fix or change their feelings.

Pleasers:

- Learn to develop the emotion of anger. It's an underdeveloped emotion in pleasers.
- Learn to tolerate rejection and displeasure from others. Jesus had enemies because he had opinions and spoke truth.
- Be honest rather than minimizing.
- Learn what you like and tell others. (I like Mexican food...let's go to have that!)
- Notice and own your anxiety. It's at the root of your pleasing.



Vacillators:

- Use the List of Soul Words to discover the feelings under your anger (e.g., anxiety).
- Learn to be disappointed without going to “all bad.” Every day, person, job, church etc. is both good and bad. Learn to live in the middle...good and bad mixed together.
- Notice your tendency to idealize and learn to live in reality. This means disappointments and setbacks are normal.
- Notice how times of ruminating and preoccupation build anxiety. The buildup of anxiety often leads to venting. Instead of rehearsing and reviewing, count your blessings, sing a song, review the good and seek to be present in the moment verses in your head spinning.
- Learn to grieve; it will lessen the anger.

Controllers:

- Remember the child you once were and develop compassion for the hurts you endured.
- Grieve instead of blocking the pain with anger.
- Your need for control is about distancing yourself from childhood pain. If you let yourself receive the comfort and compassion you never got as a child, your anger will decrease.
- Ask for a do-over and apologize when anger gets the best of you. The people in the present are getting the anger that the people in the past deserve. Your anger is turbocharged by past pain.
- Learn to be vulnerable. It was unsafe as a child, but it can be safe as an adult.
- Learn to ask for help. Not everyone is like the parent(s) who abused your trust.
- Ask others their opinions. Listen and be open to the ideas and suggestions they offer.

Victims:

- Remember the child you once were and develop compassion for the hurts you endured.
- Grieve the pain of your childhood instead of numbing the pain or dissociating.
- You are worth protecting. Get help to leave abusive relationships.
- Recognize the shame you feel was a result of childhood trauma. You are not defective but the way you were parented (or neglected) was defective.
- Get support from the church and county: counseling, support groups, Celebrate Recovery, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Narcotics Anonymous. You cannot heal in isolation.

Additional resources for all attachment styles:

- ***The Body Keeps the Score***, by Bessel Van der Kolk.
- ***When the Body says No***, by Gabor Mate
- ***What Happened to You?***, by Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey
- ***Changes That Heal***, by Henry Cloud
- ***Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire***



Step 2: Recognize: Identify Your Core Pattern

The best way to read through your core pattern is to go to www.howwelove.com and click on Core Patterns. You may be surprised just how accurately we can describe your endless fight.

Here' how Milan and I discovered and defeated the endless dance.

For the first fifteen years of our marriage, I was an avoider and Milan was a pleaser. Once we discovered this, we needed to grow, and we each had to own our attachment injuries and acknowledge how each of our styles contributed to our core fight. I realized my family didn't bond on any meaningful level. Conversation was always about the weather and as deep as a piece of paper. To begin my growth journey, I used a feeling word list to try and gain an awareness and vocabulary for my lost emotions. This took time. Now it's easy.

I had no memories of comfort and little physical nurturing growing up. No wonder I had difficulty with affection and lacked empathy! I learned to acknowledge grief and asked God to give me back my tears and they are fully functioning now. I took it a step further and asked for comfort through a hug or holding time when I was sad or anxious. This process was very uncomfortable at first. I was used to being self-sufficient and I resisted feeling any need for another person's help. It wasn't safe to be needy in my house as a child. Growth meant learning that healthy dependence is important in close relationships. Over time, Milan's complaint about my lack of affection and detachment began to disappear. He felt connected and didn't have to guess about my mood. I could tell him.

Milan grew towards a secure connector and out of his Pleaser love style by owning his anxiety. He became aware that his mood depended on everyone else's mood. If all was happy, he was calm but if others were upset, he was anxious. When he was young, he had an explosive parent, and he was a good kid, the nice boy to try and keep the anger from erupting. His anxiety began to make sense to both of us. It started before we ever met.

Like most pleasers, Milan never got angry. He risked showing that emotion in appropriate ways and begins to tolerate displeasure in me without going into the "be nice and fix it" mode. He learned to think about what he wanted and to take care of himself rather than constantly focusing on the feelings and needs of others. He stopped hovering and checking in every five- minutes. My core complaints dissolved as the core pattern lost its power.

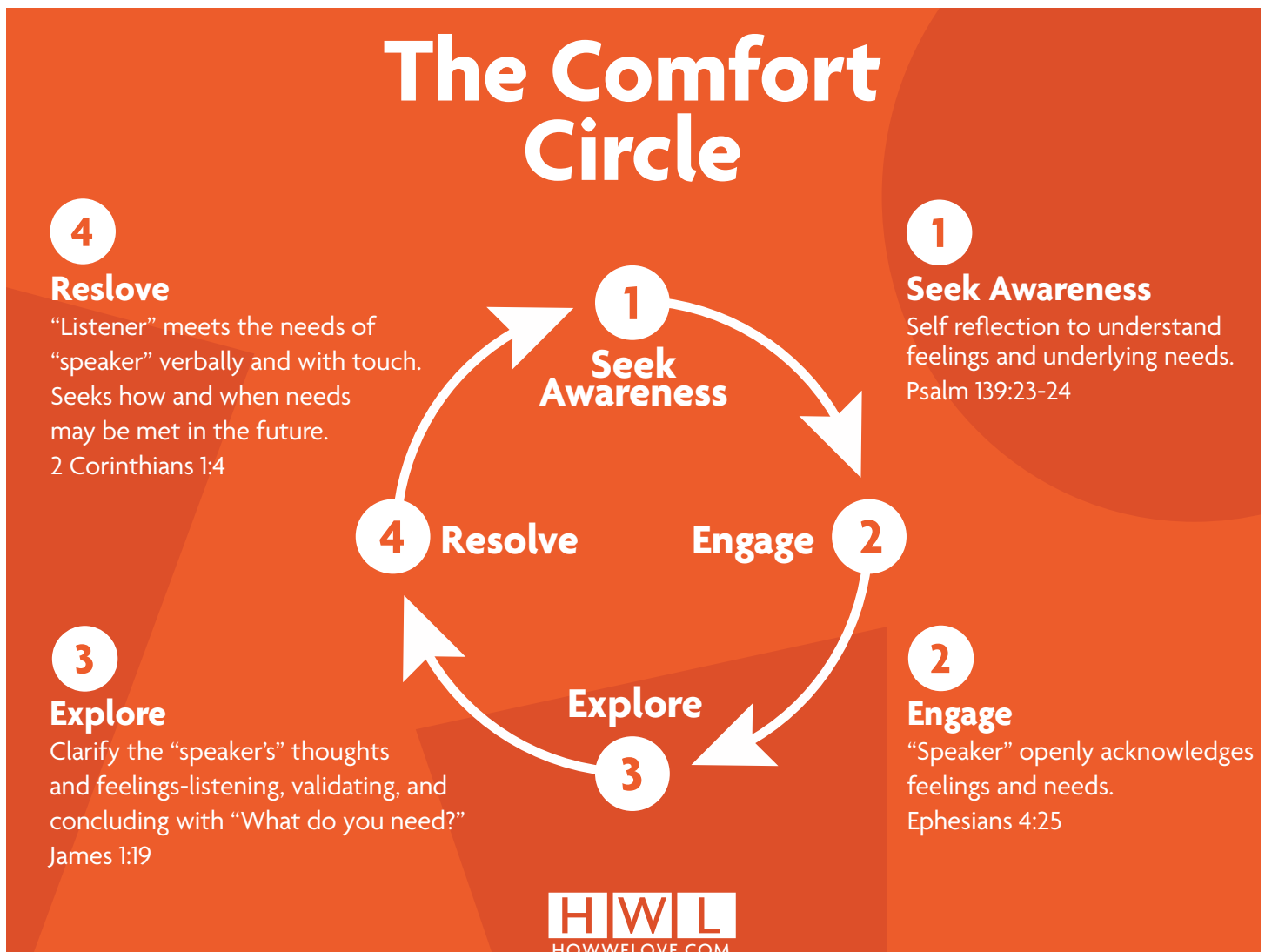
You have two choices. You can understand and grow out of the core pattern, or it will manage you and affect your relationships in painful ways. Is the growth difficult at times? Yes! Is it worth it? A thousand times; yes! We are approaching our fiftieth anniversary in June 2022. This is tested and true. We know what growth requires and we wholeheartedly believe the results are amazing and worth the effort.

Step 3: Repair:

Learn to take a trip around the Comfort Circle.

First, let's look at a diagram of the circle.

The goal of the comfort circle is to have a great conversation with your spouse or anyone. When another person is safe and deeply listens to us, we most often feel relief. Remember, each broken style has its own way of handling stress. Avoiders flee and detach, Pleasers freeze and fix, Vacillators protest and blame, Controllers get angry, and victims numb out. Reactivity is the enemy of a great conversation. Reactivity can be loud or quiet. Whether you're checking out of getting angry, communication is derailed. The comfort circle is designed to help learn to keep you engaged, calm, curious, and non-reactive. That's a lot to learn so it will take time to master this skill, but it works. Let me explain each step.





Now, let's break down each step around the Comfort Circle:

Step 1: Seek Awareness

This step is all about self-awareness and being able to acknowledge and describe our internal state; our feelings and needs. Awareness of others and the ability to tune into their feelings is important too. Feelings are signals that tell us what we need. Self-awareness helps us identify when we are stressed and upset. Stress brings difficult emotions, and we want relief. Besides the examples of flee, freeze, fight or fix we all have a stress response. It's what we do to find that relief. Perhaps we clean, turn to an addiction or shop. Maybe we find relief by, eating, drinking, smoking, or using drugs or pornography. Many of us find distraction by scrolling through our phone, watching TV, sleeping, or getting busy with our to-do list. *All addictions are non-relational ways of seeking relief.* Most adults with addictions didn't learn as kids to go to people for relief. They have few memories of comfort from parents or other adults.

Step 2: Engage


This step is about letting others help when you are stressed or offering to help another family member who is struggling. To engage means we learn to find relief relationally. The comfort circle can begin with a request when you are aware of your own stress. *"I'm stressed and anxious, and I need a trip around the comfort circle."* Or it can begin with an invitation when you observe stress in another person. *"Honey, you're on a frantic cleaning spree. I know you clean when you're stressed. Come take a break and let's try the comfort circle."* You can set a time if the present moment is too busy.

Step 3: Explore and Find Out More

The key word here is *curiosity*. The goal is to learn to explore and listen deeply to another. We can't do this if we assume we understand after hearing one sentence. Exploring requires the listener to be curious, ask good questions, stay engaged and remain calm. Remember, one person is the listener, and one is the speaker *all the way* around the circle. Do you know how to listen, even for five minutes, without sharing your perspective, getting defensive, judging, or rolling your eyes? You will need a list of Soul Words (feeling words) and you can download a copy for free at www.howwelove.com (freebies).

Here are a few questions or statements that will help:

1. Ask for details about the stress: *"What things are bothering you or upsetting you?"*
2. Always ask about feelings and use the list of Soul Words: *"Can you pick three feelings from the list of Soul Words that describe how this stressor makes you feel?"* If there is a feeling that surprises you, ask more about that feeling. At any time, you can ask for more information. *"Tell me more."* If you really want to make an impact, learn to validate. *"I can see how that would be hard."* Ask your partner to rate the feelings from 1 (low) to 10 (high). This will give you an idea about the intensity of the speaker's internal experience. The higher the number, the more stress they are experiencing.



3. After you have identified and explored the stressful event and resulting feelings, ask this; *“Do you remember experiencing these feelings as a child? If so, how old were you, and what happened?”* This inquiry will help you understand your spouse in a far deeper way.

One more tip for the curious listener. When people are deeply listened to, they often get emotional. You don't have to fix it, just say what you see. Literally. *“I see those tears.” “I can tell this makes you anxious.” “I can see this is hard for you to talk about.” “I notice it’s hard for you to make eye contact when you share something painful.”* Then reassure the speaker. For example, *“I want to hear this.” “I’m grateful you feel safe to cry.”* or *“Your pain matters to me.”*

Step 4: Resolution

Resolution means both people feel settled and connected at the end of a conversation. Sometimes being deeply heard is enough. Sometimes there is a problem that needs a solution. If you have a strong disagreement, it may be helpful to switch roles and let your spouse share their perspective as you explore and find out more before you try to resolve. This last step can take many forms. The Listener can ask the Speaker what they need to feel resolved. Here are some examples of possible resolutions:

- **Comfort.** Comfort is something soothing when the topic being shared is painful. The Speaker can ask for comfort. It might be a request for a hug, or a request for a walk. It's up to the speaker to determine what would be soothing.
- **Make a request.** A Request is asking for something specific from your spouse after you have been heard. When you make a request make the request something specific and attainable. For example, don't say, *“I need you to spend more time with me.”* Rather, *“I need one night a week when we plan alone time after the kids are in bed.”* This is a request that is specific, defined, and doable.
- **Compromise.** A compromise means each side makes concessions to find a solution. Can you find middle ground? Can you offer a solution so each person gets something that will help you reach a resolution? This isn't always possible, but it is often an overlooked way of moving forward in a positive direction.
- **Test different solutions:** Often each person has an idea of how to resolve a problem. Why not try each person's idea and then evaluate? *“Let's try this your way for two weeks and then my way for two weeks and see if this brings clarity.”*
- **Agree to Disagree:** Sometimes in marriage we need to agree to disagree. There should be a balance of give and take rather than one partner always getting their way.
- **Apologies: “I'm sorry.”** Sometimes and apology is very healing. It acknowledges our behavior was hurtful. If this is hard it's an especially important skill to learn. All it takes is some humility. After all, no one is right all the time.

I've given you a bird's eye view of the process of change.

In close relationships, especially marriage, we are exposed, and exposure brings shame. Our weaknesses are out in the open. Owning our shortcomings or lack of development is uncomfortable, but essential. We know from personal experience it will take time. We spent two years of diligent effort to overturn 18 years of early programming from our childhood homes. At times, it was extremely uncomfortable and required new levels of vulnerability.

Vulnerability means trying new things that will feel awkward. We experienced the shame of feeling inadequate and unprepared for healthy adult relationships. We took hundreds of laps around the Comfort Circle. At first, we called it the discomfort circle. We know from experience if you put in the effort to try new things and practice them over and over it will produce lasting change that will take you out of the frustrating, endless repetitive pattern. I am no longer an avoider. Milan is no longer a pleaser. The core pattern that plagued us for the first fifteen years of our marriage is gone. If you didn't grow up in a home where you experienced secure connection, you can learn it as an adult along with your spouse and kids and we are here to help you.

Blessings,
Milan and Kay Yerkovich



About the Authors:

For years, unseen forces governed the ways we loved each other and we didn't recognize the painful patterns we were stuck in until we revisited our first lessons in love from our families. For the first time, we understood the source of our frustrations and knew there was hope for deep and lasting change in our marriage.

Since then, we have worked towards a more secure bond with each other, developed new patterns of engaging and rebuilt a flourishing marriage. Our prayer is that you will soon discover what we have: the relief that comes from working towards resolution, experiencing deep understanding, and knowing comfort. Married in 1972, Milan and Kay have four children. When they aren't writing and speaking, they enjoy their 10 grandchildren. Milan and Kay enjoy speaking together and have co-authored two books, *How We Love*, (2006 and Expanded Version, 2018), and *How We Love Our Kids* (2011).

howwelove.com

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