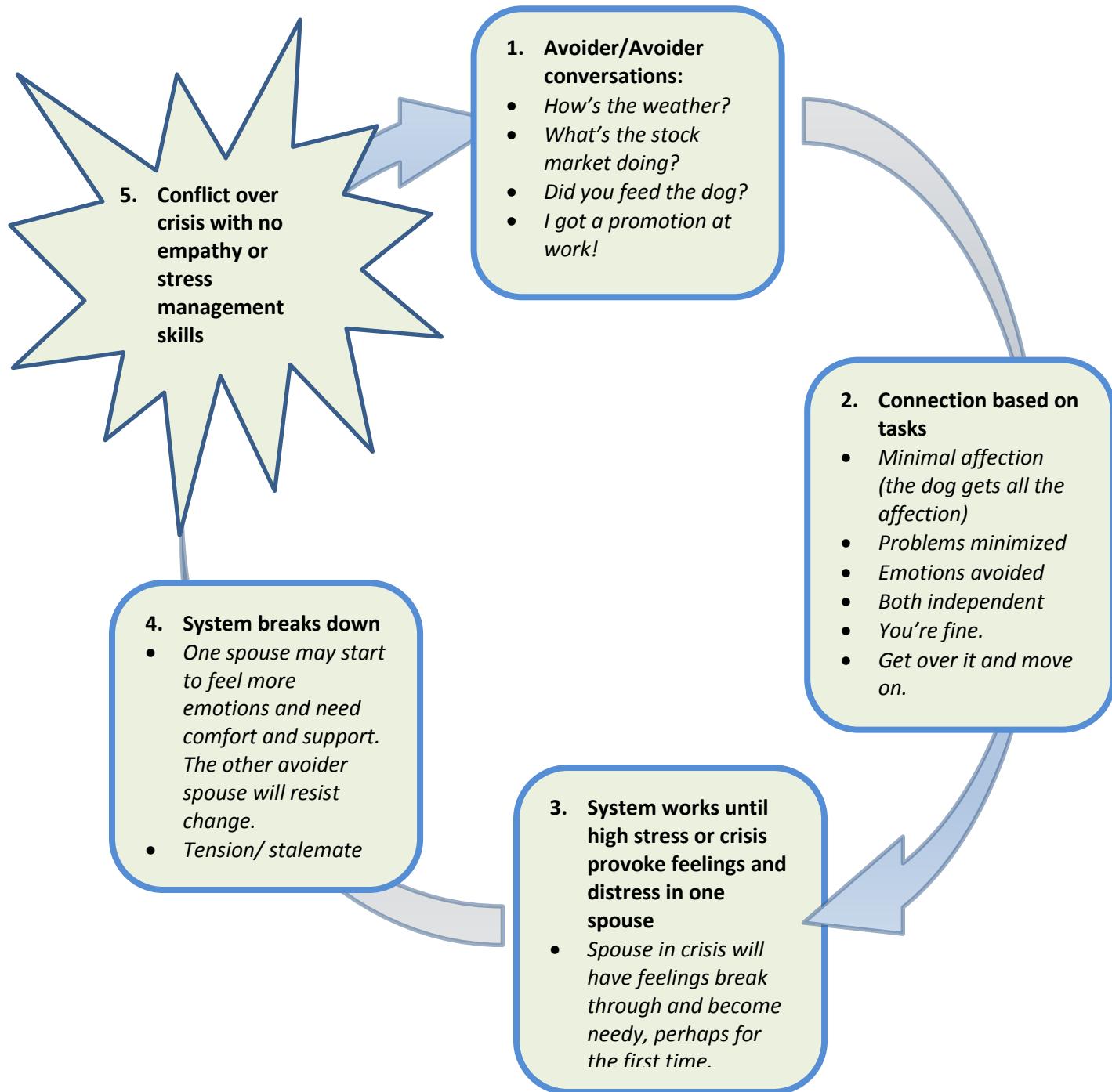


ATTACHMENT CORE PATTERN THERAPY™

AVOIDER/AVOIDER CORE PATTERN

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Attachment Core Pattern Therapy™ Interventions

Avoider & Avoider

The AVOIDER

- I would describe myself as independent and self-reliant.
- I'm a task-oriented, high achiever.
- I am usually "fine" and when something bad happens, I try to get over it and move on.
- In my family growing up, we rarely (or never) discussed personal concerns.
- Sometimes I avoid confrontation or arguments.
- I feel uncomfortable when someone is very emotional, especially if I think I am supposed to help that person.
- I don't feel comfortable around highly emotional and needy people.
- I'm usually happiest when others are happy and don't want a lot from me.
- I show my love by doing tasks or giving gifts rather than being sentimental.
- My family growing up was not very affectionate and I am like my parents. I don't touch much or show a lot of affection.
- I don't really think about my own feelings and needs very often.
- I don't really miss my spouse or family if I'm away from them.

Initial Attraction

When Avoiders meet, the attraction is often intellectual and task oriented. These two may connect over similar jobs, interests, books, hobbies and enjoy cerebral discussions. Since both dismiss emotions and neediness, this will be a logical, productive relationship where both people have an independent, self-sufficient outlook. This will be a calm and steady relationship and both partners will be productive and duty oriented.

Overview of the Core Pattern

Nothing seems to ruffle this couple. Conflict will be avoided unless it can be rationally discussed. Affection will be minimal and often a family pet gets more touch than the couple give to one another. Of all the combinations, this one is most likely to not want children. If children do enter the family, the system will be stressed as babies and toddlers are a bundle of feelings and needs. Arguments may ensue over division of labor.

This couple seems to sail along with few problems and no prominent Core Pattern until a crisis hits that breaks the lid off of shut down feelings. At this point, one person will start to feel and need support on some level, and their spouse will struggle and feel inadequate to make this shift. This couple rarely comes to therapy unless a crisis has forced tension into the relationship and the pair begins to struggle. A Core Pattern may emerge after a crisis where the spouse in pain feels unsupported and let down by their mate's lack of empathy.

Following, we list the general individual growth goals for the Avoider. Start with one goal and focus on making observable progress in that area. While this growth may seem unnecessary, eventually a crisis will likely cause a need for growth. Aging brings losses and this pair does not know how to navigate loss. For more ideas, see the How We Love Workbook.

Individual Growth Steps for the Avoider (see How We Love Workbook)

1. **Discover feelings:** Use the Soul Words List to learn to identify feelings. Your lack of awareness of emotions and your general inability to express needs is an injury that needs addressing.
2. **Notice:** Pay attention to your body. Your body holds in feelings and keeps them from surfacing. Notice tightness in your chest, jaw or throat.
3. **Ask:** Learn to ask for help instead of isolating when you are facing something difficult. You cannot know the value of comfort until you have experienced it.
4. **Eye contact:** Ask your spouse to gently tell you when you are not making eye contact or smiling when speaking about something painful. Lack of eye contact is another way of avoiding feelings, needs and awareness of others. Smiling is a way of moving away from feelings. These are largely unconscious reactions, so having feedback is important. Try again to share while making eye contact or being mindful not to smile.
5. **Pursue and initiate:** When someone is emotional, get the Soul Words List and questions for the listener (freebies on the website) and find out more rather than avoiding the emotion.
6. **Don't fix:** Your tendency is to fix emotions (problem solve) rather than just listening. Learn to listen to the emotions of others and validate the reality of their emotions.
7. **Describe your feelings:** Tell your spouse about your day using three feelings words rather than just facts.
8. **Listen:** One learns to listen by being listened to. Admit that you are not a good listener when things get emotional. Learn to ask questions and stay present.
9. **Link feelings to needs:** Try and link your feelings to needs. "I feel overwhelmed and weary. I need a hug." Use this format: I feel _____. I need _____ to facilitate growth.
10. **Explore childhood:** Avoiders often see no problem with their childhood, yet they have no memories of comfort or emotional connection. Use the workbook in the back of How We Love to explore the origins of your Avoider imprint.
11. **Don't isolate:** The older we get, the more loss we experience. Use times of stress and loss to explore your feelings and ask for help.
12. **Make relationships a priority:** You may be a workaholic and consider your job or things as more important than people. Consider how your emphasis on production and possessions hurts the people in your family.

Identifying and Exiting the Core Pattern

In Part 3 of our book, How We Love (2006), we discuss Duets that Damage How We Love. When harmful love styles combine in close relationships, (especially marriage) a destructive, repetitive Core Pattern is created that blocks emotional intimacy and makes resolution of conflict difficult. These reactive patterns are at the root of many complaints and struggles, so learning to identify and exit the Core Pattern is critical to moving toward a secure connection as a couple. Each person must own and work on their harmful love style and use the Comfort Circle as a new and healthy format for connecting as a couple. (For more on the Comfort Circle, go to howwelove.com).

See Avoider/Avoider Core Pattern Diagram

The diagram on page 1 explains the circular Core Pattern. Each step of the Core Pattern is represented by Steps 1 through 5. What is happening in each step is explained under the section **What's going on?** Then, ***individual action steps and couple action steps*** are listed that either Avoider Spouse would have to do to pull out, or exit, the Core Pattern. The Comfort Circle is useful in that it requires each person to listen to the other without interrupting, defending or fixing.

Overview of the Core Pattern: What's going on at each point in the circle?

Step 1: Everyday conversations between Avoiders:

1. **Avoider/Avoider conversations:**
 - *How's the weather?*
 - *What's the stock market doing?*
 - *Did you feed the dog?*
 - *I got a promotion at work!*

What's going on? While this couple may have deep, intellectual conversations that are stimulating, they will not have any intimate or vulnerable emotional conversations. Neither is dissatisfied with this arrangement. Both were trained in childhood to be self-sufficient and minimize feelings and needs. They may argue over differing opinions but more vulnerable conversations are unlikely.

Step 2: Connection based on tasks and responsibilities:

2. Connection based on tasks

- *Minimal affection (the dog gets all the affection)*
- *Problems minimized*
- *Emotions avoided*
- *Both independent*
- *You're fine.*
- *Get over it and move on.*

What's going on? Problems and conflicts are avoided, especially if they might stir up emotions. This pair is often somewhat dishonest, as telling the truth might stir up unwanted feelings or conflict. They may show their displeasure to one another non-verbally but it may take years to actually have an argument. As time goes on, bickering may occur but there is rarely resolution or repair after a disagreement. This couple may struggle with touch and physical affection as it was not something either spouse experienced in their childhood.

Step 3: System works until crisis occurs:

3. System works until high stress or crisis provoke feelings and distress in one spouse

- *Spouse in crisis will have feelings break through and become needy, perhaps for the first time.*

What's going on? Over time this couple may experience a crisis together or perhaps only one spouse will be challenged with an overwhelming situation. The spouse in crisis and distress may have new unfamiliar emotions. The crisis may be a death, a severe illness or a devastating loss. The spouse in crisis needs support which throws the other avoider spouse into a tail spin as their ability to provide emotional support is lacking. Occasionally, one person will get restless

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or bored with the lack of depth in the relationship and express frustration as they search for more meaning. Either way, change in one person stresses the relationship in new ways.

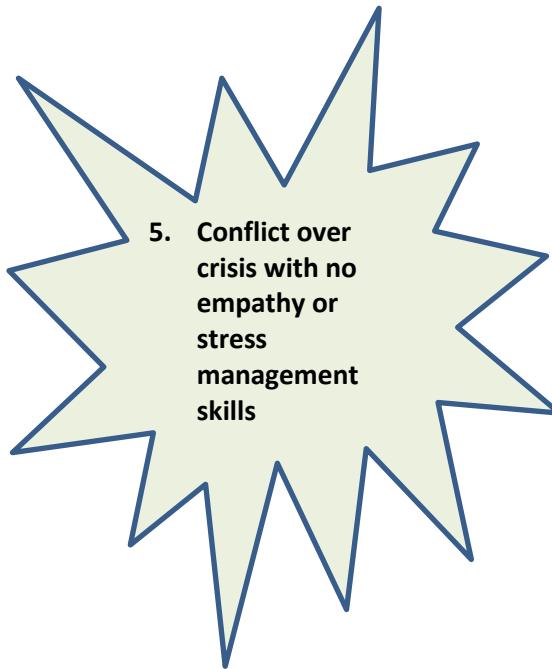
Step 4: System breaks down:

4. System breaks down

- *One spouse may start to feel more emotions and need comfort and support. The other avoider spouse will resist change.*
- *Tension/ stalemate*

What's going on? This produces a crisis and an uncomfortable shift in the relationship. For the first time, one spouse needs emotional support, empathy or more depth while the other will hold on to their Avoider tendencies.

Step 5: Couple struggles to navigate this new situation:



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What's going on? This shift may cause more dissatisfaction and stress in the marriage as the couple struggles to navigate this new territory.

After a Crisis:

Avoider who needs support may feel:

- I am hurting and I don't understand why my spouse ignores my pain.
- I feel overwhelmed and I can't just "keep moving on" like I have in the past.
- My spouse feels distant and awkward around me.
- I wish my spouse would initiate conversations about this crisis.
- I'm not sure how to cope and my spouse isn't helping.
- I wish my spouse would stop doing tasks and just sit down and listen.

Avoider who is still in "Avoider mode" may feel:

- My spouse feels annoyed and impatient with me.
- I am trying my hardest to keep up with everything but I don't feel appreciated for taking up the slack.
- I am not sure how to help my spouse through this crisis.
- We will get by; we always do and I will be glad when my spouse is "back to normal".
- It makes me uncomfortable when my spouse is sad or cries.
- We have always had a great marriage but now things feel tense between us.

Interventions after a Crisis:

Life is difficult and when a crisis takes place or we face a great loss, locked down feelings can start to emerge. This is difficult for both spouses as they have successfully dismissed feelings and neediness up to this point. Feelings tell us what we need, so when we ignore our feelings we also ignore our needs. When we are in emotional pain, a listening ear, affection and comfort help to ease the pain. Crying releases stress hormones and endorphins. Pushing away tears adds to the stress. As we age, life brings more and more loss, so a crisis may be the time to learn new skills that will continue to benefit the relationship. The following interventions may be very helpful:

Growth Goals for Avoider/Avoider Couples:

1. Use the following resources on the website howwelove.com: Listener Guide for the Comfort Circle and the Soul Words List. This will help the speaker express themselves more easily. The listener should follow the instructions on the Listener Guide moving through all the questions without fixing or reacting. Just listen. Don't have an important conversation without these tools.
2. Learn to cry and ask for a hug when you do. Grief is a shutdown emotion in Avoiders and it may take painful circumstances for feelings to emerge.

3. If your spouse cries, touch them and say what you see. "I see how sad you are." "I see the pain in your eyes." "I see your tears and I want to comfort you." Acknowledging tears makes your spouse feel seen. Touching and offering comfort lets them know the tears don't scare you away.
4. If talking about pain feels too vulnerable, write or journal and let your spouse read it.
5. Increase non-sexual touch by saying; "I just want to sit (or lie down) close to you for a while and have some comforting touch that doesn't lead to sex."
6. Be honest in how initiating comfort (or asking for comfort) makes you feel uncomfortable, but do it anyway. "I am feeling awkward but I want to help. Would a hug help?" "I feel silly asking you to hold me but I want to try anyway."

Use the Comfort Circle to Explore Your Family History:

Understanding why you each became Avoiders will build compassion and patience as you try to develop emotional awareness. See the beginning chapters of the How We Love Workbook for more questions you can discuss together.

1. Make a list of feelings you rarely experience. (Use the Soul Words List.) Why do you think these feelings are so difficult for you to feel and express? Does your childhood history give you any clues? Discuss with your mate.
2. Discuss times when you were growing up where you were stressed, upset, anxious or sad when your parents did not notice, or understand what you were going through. How might touch, comfort or a listening ear have helped you if your parents had been aware?
3. Talk about touch and affection in your home growing up. What did you experience? How has that shaped you?
4. Was there any adult outside your family growing up to whom you did feel bonded? (Teacher, coach, neighbor, aunt, uncle, grandparent, parent of a friend). What was true about your relationships that made you feel connected, known and understood?
5. How might your parents have made it safer for you to open up and share your heart?

Use the Comfort Circle to Explore Current Feelings:

Remember the goal of the Comfort Circle is not to "fix" but rather to understand. It's an opportunity to give to your spouse what they may not have received as a kid: a listening ear, tender touch, validation of feelings and thoughtful questions. Listening is one of the most powerful expressions of love.

1. Pick a time to do the Comfort Circle and use the downloads at howwelove.com under "Freebies."

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2. Pick a speaker and listener. The speaker will hold and use the Soul Words List. The listener will use the “Guide for the Listener.”
3. Listener: Ask each question on the list pausing to repeat and recap what you heard. Skip any questions that don’t apply.
4. Switch roles.

After practice, you can learn to ask great questions that are not on the list. The “Guide for the Listener” is a tool to help you learn to be a great listener.

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A note from Milan & Kay:

Due to our Christian beliefs, we often speak in churches and our faith is deeply intertwined with our work. We believe one of the most important interventions to bring healing to relationships is prayer. The Christian gospel is the story of rupture, repair and restoration. God sent his Son, Jesus, to provide payment for our sin so we can enter into a relationship with a holy God, clean, forgiven and restored. The offering of this gift involved *initiation*. Jesus entered our messy, broken world with a willingness to experience our sorrow and pain. The gift of His loving presence involved *sacrifice and pain*. Jesus's death on the cross expresses the magnitude of His sacrificial love. As we accept this gift of love, we enter into a secure connection with God, becoming a member of his family, with a promise we will never be abandoned.

This serves as a model for healing our relationships. Overcoming these Core Patterns means we must *initiate* and move towards pain, not away from it, with a focus on restoration and redemption. We must be willing to *sacrifice* and embrace the *pain* of taking on our own wounds as well as the injuries of our mate learning to repair ruptures. This kind of love and commitment builds a deep trust and bond. Over time, our marriage can become our most secure connection and provide a charted path to lead others into healing, freedom and joy.

Praying as an individual and as a couple is a powerful intervention at any point around the Core Pattern as we seek to escape the pull of the destructive dance and find the freedom of secure connection. Our prayers are with you and for you on this journey.

Blessings, Milan and Kay