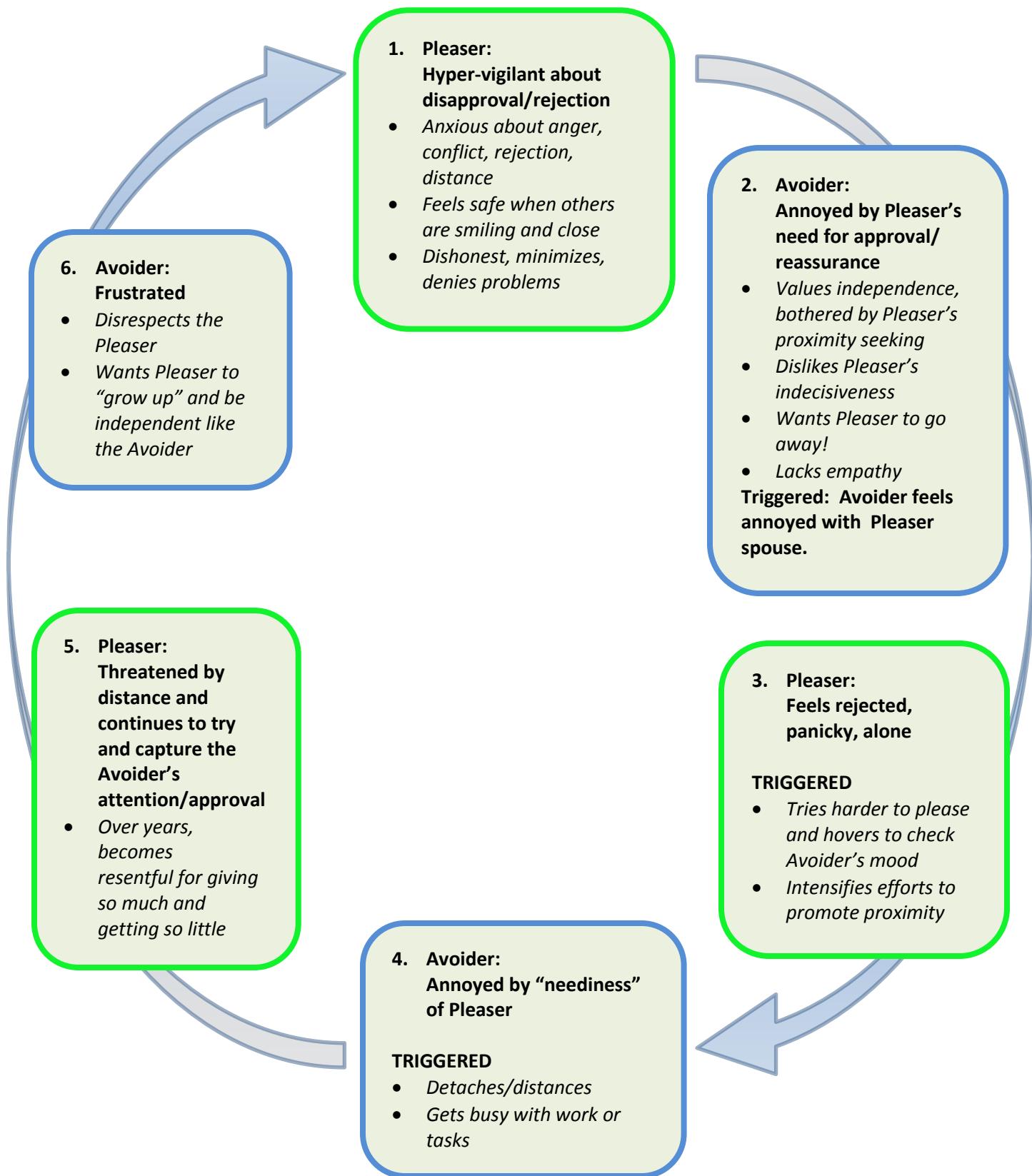


# ATTACHMENT CORE PATTERN THERAPY™

## AVOIDER/PLEASER CORE PATTERN

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## **Attachment Core Pattern Therapy™ Interventions**

### **Avoider & Pleaser**

#### **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.
- I've felt resentment toward my spouse for always wanting something more from me.
- I'm tired of my spouse telling me I am distant and/or don't show enough 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.

#### **The PLEASER**

- For most (or all) of my childhood, I could have been described as the "good kid."
- I feel very anxious if someone is upset or annoyed with me so I am good at "keeping the peace."
- I seek connection and avoid rejection by anticipating and meeting others' needs.
- One of my parents was either fearful or critical and I tried hard to win approval and keep them happy.
- At times, I've had difficulty tolerating physical or emotional distance from my spouse.
- Conflict makes me uneasy and I prefer to deal with disagreement by giving in or making up for it and quickly moving on.
- I worry a lot.
- I have difficulty confronting or saying no and sometimes it makes me less than truthful.
- I generally don't feel angry, or if I do, I try to think about something else to get rid of it.
- I inwardly resent giving more than I get and feel like a doormat.
- I don't often ask for help and feel uncomfortable when others try to give me assistance.
- When I sense others are upset or distancing, I pursue and try harder to win them back.

#### **Initial Attraction:**

Initially, the Avoider sees the Pleaser as sweet, caring and attentive. The Pleaser's considerate, thoughtful, acts make the Avoider feel special and noticed. This feels great because they didn't get a lot of personal attention growing up. Because the Avoider is used to taking care of themselves, the Pleaser's acts of kindness are pleasant and enjoyable.

The Pleaser likes the consistency, strength, confidence and steady temperament of the Avoider. Avoiders are easy to please because they don't expect much out of relationships. The Pleaser feels successful, because often they had to work much harder to get recognition when they were growing up. If the Pleaser had a critical or volatile parent or a difficult sibling, this feels like a breeze because the Avoider is not easily upset.

### **Overview of the Core Pattern:**

Over time, the Pleaser begins to feel rejected by the Avoider's independent, self-sufficient relational style. The Avoider's tendency to disengage and detach makes the Pleaser feel anxious about the relationship wondering, "What is wrong?" "Am I making my spouse happy?" As the Pleaser feels cut off, they pursue to close the gap and lower their own anxiety. They wonder why the Avoider doesn't seem to want or need them as much as they used to.

The Avoider becomes annoyed when the Pleaser interprets their need for space as a personal rejection. This is baffling to the Avoider who has always been independent and self-sufficient. They began to see the Pleaser as smothering and too needy so they distance and continue to be self-sufficient as they have always been.

The irritation of the Avoider increases the Pleaser's anxiety. Why isn't their spouse happier? Why don't they want to be closer? The Pleaser increases their efforts to win approval and begins to resent the fact that they give more in the relationship. This irritates the Avoider, because they were not asking for anything in the first place. And so, the dance continues. Since both the Pleaser and Avoider are adverse to conflict and difficult emotions, most problems are minimized and not addressed. Honest, difficult conversations are rare in this pair.

### **When stuck in this Core Pattern each feels:**

#### **The Avoider:**

- My spouse thinks something is wrong if I want space or time alone.
- I feel smothered by how much my spouse wants.
- I wish my spouse had interests and didn't lean on me so much.
- My spouse gives me things and does things for me that I don't want or need.
- Sometimes my spouse is "too nice" and it feels fake and insincere.
- I feel like my spouse is always taking my "emotional temperature" in indirect ways.
- My spouse makes me feel guilty if I want time away.

#### **The Pleaser:**

- I feel rejected and anxious when my spouse does not want to be with me.
- I feel my anger will further push them away so I try to keep things peaceful and pleasant.
- I try to "read" my spouse's moods and feelings and do nice things so they will want to be with me.

- I sometimes feel resentful because I give a lot more than my spouse gives, but I usually don't voice my anger.
- It feels like my spouse doesn't need me very much.
- I am always closing the gap or saying I'm sorry after tension in the relationship.

Following, we list the OVERALL general individual growth goals for the Avoider and Pleaser. Ask your spouse to pick a growth goal from **your** list that would be most meaningful to them and begin there. Start with one goal and focus on making observable progress in that area. For more ideas, see the How We Love Workbook.

**Individual Growth Steps for the Pleaser:** (see How We Love Workbook)

1. **Own anxiety.** I will own my anxiety underlying much of my Pleaser behavior. I will see my worry and overprotection as a problem rather than labeling it as love.
2. **Self-awareness:** I will work on becoming aware of my own feelings instead of continually focusing on the mood of others.
3. **Receive:** I will think about and ask for what I need and learn to be a receiver as well as a giver.
4. **Boundaries:** I will learn to have boundaries and say no to anger that is expressed with harsh tones or mean words.
5. **Over-commitment:** I will learn and rehearse a no speech rather than be over-committed. "Thanks for asking but my schedule is too full to accept that job (offer, obligation, invitation, request). "
6. **Tolerate rejection:** I will stop believing the lie that I can make everyone happy. I will not try and fix people or change their mood when they are upset with me. I will remind myself conflict is a normal part of life.
7. **Direct honest words.** I will own my tendency to be indirect and dishonest to avoid conflict. I will learn to speak with direct honest statements rather than minimizing. If necessary, I will write my feelings and read them to my spouse.
8. **My own triggers:** I will tell my spouse when their anger triggers me and ask for a few minutes to calm down and gather my thoughts. Then I will reengage and ask about the feelings in my spouse that underlie the anger. "I can see how upset you are and I want to hear about the feelings you were having before you got angry."
9. **Anger:** I will attempt to identify and express my own anger instead of minimizing or disregarding it. I will learn to express my anger in appropriate ways.
10. **Being alone:** I will practice being alone and learn to enjoy time by myself.
11. **Difficult emotions:** Instead of fixing, minimizing and pacifying difficult emotions, I will lean into these emotions and *find out more* instead of doing something nice or distracting to make them go away.
12. **Quit rescuing:** Making sure no one ever has a bad feeling is not love. It's rescuing. We all have to learn to cope with stress. Doing for others what they could do for themselves makes weak family members.

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

1. **Discover feelings:** Use the list of soul words 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

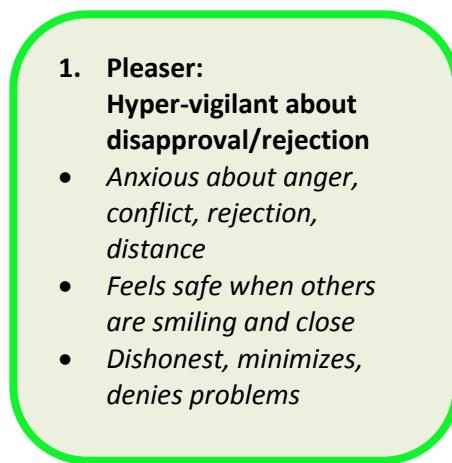
Circle as a new and healthy format for connecting as a couple. (For more on the Comfort Circle, go to [howwelove.com](http://howwelove.com)).

### See Avoider/Pleaser Core Pattern diagram

The diagram on page one explains the circular Core Pattern. Each step of the Core Pattern is represented by Steps 1 through 6. What is happening in each step is explained under the section **What's going on?** Then, in the following section **individual or couple action steps** are listed that either the Avoider or Pleaser would have to do to pull out of, 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. The goal is to recognize the pressure building in Steps 1 and 2 and address the Core Pattern at the beginning which could alleviate the completion of the destructive dance. At any point in the circle, steps can be taken to exit the Core Pattern by either spouse.

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

##### Step 1: Pleaser is hyper-vigilant about closeness and distance:



##### What's going on?

1. The anxious Pleaser has learned to watch and observe the emotional states of others in an attempt to reassure themselves that things are okay. They derive their security from others. If others are ok, then they are ok. If their spouse is not ok, then they are agitated until the spouse seems happy again.
2. The Pleaser is anxious about disapproval or rejection so they do everything to please the spouse in an attempt to prevent anger or rejection.
3. Like the Vacillator, Pleasers are proximity seekers and feel safe when others are close. If problems or difficult emotions arise, they minimize, dismiss, deny or lie about problems to prevent separation. Unlike the Vacillator, Pleasers rarely get angry when they are disappointed, rather, they try harder.

**Step 2: Avoider becomes annoyed:**

**2. Avoider:**  
**Annoyed by Pleaser's need for approval/reassurance**

- *Values independence, bothered by Pleaser's proximity seeking*
- *Dislikes Pleaser's indecisiveness*
- *Wants Pleaser to go away!*
- *Lacks empathy*

**TRIGGERED:** Avoider is annoyed by pleaser spouse

**What's going on?**

1. The Avoider becomes annoyed by the Pleaser's continual proximity seeking, hovering and need for constant approval and reassurance.
2. Avoiders value independence and mastery through intense focus on the task at hand. They do not *need* the Pleaser and are irritated when they are disrupted by the Pleaser's *need* to be close.
3. Avoiders are decisive and strongly dislike the Pleaser's indecisiveness which is caused by fear and insecurity.
4. Avoiders grow weary of the Pleaser's hovering and want them to "go away."
5. Lacking empathy for themselves and others, Avoiders lack the capacity to see or have compassion for the fear that dominates the Pleaser.

**Step 3: Pleaser panics:**

**3. Pleaser:**  
**Feels rejected, panicky, alone**

**TRIGGERED**

- *Tries harder to please and hovers to check Avoider's mood*
- *Intensifies efforts to promote proximity*

**What's going on?**

1. The Pleaser feels rejected and alone and his or her worst fears are realized. Triggered by disapproval and distance, panic sets in. The Pleaser tries harder and harder to please the Avoider. By hovering and observing, they are looking for any change in mood so they can tell themselves, "Things will be okay."
2. The Pleaser intensifies their efforts to promote proximity with sacrificial giving or by providing the Avoider's favorite fun, food or activity (including sex).

**Step 4: Avoider feels triggered and smothered:**

**4. Avoider:**  
**Annoyed by "neediness"**  
**of Pleaser**

**TRIGGERED**

- *Detaches/distances*
- *Gets busy with work or tasks*

**What's going on?**

1. The Avoider becomes triggered and they begin to feel smothered and overwhelmed by the constant presence of the Pleaser.
2. As their anxiety and discomfort increases, they become very annoyed at the Pleaser's neediness and may become angry at the Pleaser to get them to go away.
3. They further detach and distance by getting busy with work, tasks, hobbies or leaving the house.

**Step 5: Pleaser feels threatened and fearful:**

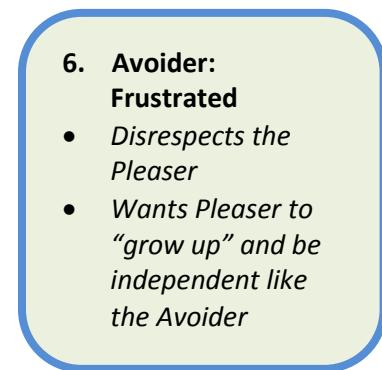
**5. Pleaser: tries harder.**  
**Threatened by**  
**distance and**  
**continues to try**  
**and capture the**  
**Avoider's**  
**attention/approval**

- *Over years, becomes resentful for giving so much and getting so little*

## What's going on?

1. The persistent Pleaser will tirelessly pursue the Avoider attempting to close the gap to capture the Avoider's attention and approval.
2. The Pleaser's pursuit can continue for years until one day the Pleaser becomes resentful of giving so much and receiving so little. At this point they can snap, rapidly distance themselves from their spouse and perhaps have an affair with someone who appreciates them. Once this happens, it is often difficult to get them to reengage in marriage reunification.

## Step 6: Avoider's frustration and contempt:



## What's going on? If the pattern continues....

1. Eventually, the Avoider's cumulative frustration leads them to a state of contempt and disrespect for the needy Pleaser. They want the Pleaser to "grow up" which is *code* for "become like me and have no emotional needs."
2. Over time, the unidentified Core Pattern prevails and the Avoider eventually ignores the Pleaser more and more and lives as a married single person.
3. The dejected Pleaser sits in the shadows of despair, lamenting the lack of closeness they so desperately desire.

## Growth Steps to exit the Core Pattern:

Now that you understand the pattern, how do you get out of it? In this section we will give the Pleaser and the Vacillator ideas and actions for exiting the core pattern. In addition we will include how this couple can utilize the comfort circle to exit the core pattern

## Exiting the Core Pattern Step 1: Pleaser is hyper-vigilant and pleases to avoid rejection

### **Step 1: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:**

Many Pleasers don't even realize they are anxious. It's a normal feeling. Rate your anxiety several times a day and pay attention to signs of tension in your body.

1. Notice your focus is watching others and attempting to guess their mood and feelings in an effort to keep them happy. If you believe you can make everyone happy all the time, you believe an exhausting lie!
2. Learn to identify your own feelings and needs using the Soul Word List and begin to discover your own needs.
3. Notice you defer to your spouse to make decisions. Risk making decisions on your own. It's ok if you make a mistake. Experiment this week.
4. Formulate your own opinions and risk sharing knowing your views even if they are opposed or rejected. I will remind myself conflict is not "fatal and final" as it may have felt as a child.
5. Fear, not love, drives the desire to be in close proximity and please significant others. Learn to separate from others and tolerate distance. Separation means you can't take emotional temperatures and monitor everyone's moods.
6. Notice when you lie and minimize to avoid conflict. Go back and try again. Tell the truth, learn to disagree and have an opinion and express it clearly even if it makes someone mad.
7. Journal and make connections between your adult anxiety and childhood experiences so you can have compassion (not excuses) for your struggles.

### **Step 1: Pleaser: Couple action steps to exit the Core Pattern (Comfort Circle):**

1. When you are anxious, initiate the Comfort Circle or ask for a listening or holding time to process your anxiety rather than denying your fear and fixing others.
2. If a Comfort Circle is not feasible at the time, verbally acknowledge to your spouse that you are in the "Pleaser mode," so your spouse knows you are aware of your part of the Core Pattern. I will ask for my spouse to agree upon a time to do the Comfort Circle.
3. When you become aware of a childhood memory that fuels your anxiety, ask to do the Comfort Circle to share that memory with your spouse. Don't be put off. INSIST!!

### **Step 1: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:**

1. Using the Soul Word List, develop self-awareness and begin to develop a vocabulary to describe inner feeling states. All kids are born with feelings and needs. Being independent too early stunts emotional growth.
2. Share three feelings about your day with your spouse rather than just declaring you are "fine."
3. Instead of getting angry and distancing from the Pleaser, seek to understand the childhood experiences that produced these fears.

4. Ask your spouse and kids to share feelings with you instead of trying to fix their feelings and make them go away. You don't have to make them go away. Just listen.
5. Since Avoiders rarely have memories of comfort, it's difficult to value it. Make efforts to talk about difficult situations in your life and be open to receiving comfort. Yes, it will make you anxious, but then you will better understand the anxiety in your Pleaser spouse!

### **Exiting the Core Pattern Step 2: Avoider becomes annoyed**

#### **Step 2: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:**

1. If your Pleaser spouse is hovering, they may be anxious about something. Show some empathy. Sit down and offer to do the Comfort Circle. Have them pick three words off the list and share about what has them wound up.
2. If you need space, ask for it in a kind way reassuring your spouse. "I need some space. I am not mad at you I just need to recharge."
3. Explore what you feel when someone is hovering and ask your spouse to make this a topic of the Comfort Circle.

#### **Step 2: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:**

1. The minute you feel your spouse distancing or wanting space, you get more anxious. Often you may think you did something wrong. ASK! "You seem distant. Are you upset with me or do you just need some space?"
2. Develop some of your own interests and hobbies that you can turn to when your spouse needs space. We are not talking about all the things you do because you can't say "No." We are suggesting hobbies just for you that replenish your soul. Self-care is often lacking in the Pleaser and having activities you enjoy apart from your spouse is a part of self-care.
3. Spend short amounts of time alone. Talk a walk. Get coffee. If aloneness terrifies you, try to trace that back to childhood experiences.
4. If you find yourself monitoring moods, distract yourself. Read, watch TV, take a walk. You are not responsible for everyone's feelings.

### **Exiting the Core Pattern Step 3: Pleaser feels rejected and anxious**

#### **Step 3: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern: (Comfort Circle):**

1. Review your spouse's history so you don't take their need for space as personal rejection.
2. If they are very detached you might try: "I will give you room to do your own thing if you can agree to give me some connection time as well. How can we both get what we would like here?"
3. Risk asking directly and firmly for what you need rather than just hoping. "I need a night out to dinner with you this week. What night is good for you?"

## **Exiting the Core Pattern Step 4: Avoider detaches**

### **Step 4: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern: (Comfort Circle):**

1. Instead of detaching when the Pleaser hovers, tell them how suffocated you feel. Remind them of your childhood where you were left to figure it out on your own.
2. Give your spouse hope that you are aware of your part of the Core Pattern by confessing your lack of need for connection is a problem and validating your need for growth in this area.
3. Pay attention to your levels of stress and ask for help or comfort even if you think you don't need it.
4. Don't forget to initiate a feelings check in. Ask your spouse to share three feelings from the Soul Word List about their day and share three feelings from the list about your day.

## **Exiting the Core Pattern Step 5: Pleaser tries harder to close the gap**

### **Step 5: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern: Pattern (Comfort Circle):**

1. Allow your spouse some space but balance that by inviting your spouse into quality connection times where you go around the Comfort Circle and share feelings about all aspects of life.
2. Be careful to not overwhelm the Avoider and be sensitive to how much they can tolerate in any given session. "Let's spend 15 minutes on the Comfort Circle and then we will stop, even if we aren't done."
3. You might need to find your anger and risk telling the Avoider how much their lack of engagement is causing you to become resentful.
4. Stop overdoing and being a compulsive caretaker.
5. Ask for your needs to be met in a direct way so that the relationship is reciprocal.

## **Exiting the Core Pattern Step 6: Avoider has contempt for the Pleaser**

### **Step 6: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:**

1. Do some soul searching and accept the fact that you have contributed to the marital disconnection. Acknowledge the fact that your emotional illiteracy and relational distancing has contributed to the mess.
2. Make it safe for your Pleaser spouse to learn to be honest by asking them to put words to their difficult emotions instead of smiling and denying them.
3. Avoiders lack empathy and contempt is a sure sign that you have a lot of work to do.
4. Life is hard and comfort is an important part of navigating difficult seasons. Be serious about making an effort to grow emotionally instead of staying stuck in Avoider-land.

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.

Milan & Kay Yerkovich

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