

ATTACHMENT CORE PATTERN THERAPY™

VACILLATOR/AVOIDER CORE PATTERN

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9. **Avoider:**
Waits for Vacillator to "get over it"
 - No resolution
 - When Vacillator reengages, family complies acts like nothing happened

1. **Vacillator:**
Anxiety & tension build-up due to:
 - Idealizing/disappointment
 - Preoccupied with relational closeness/distances and ruminates on desired outcomes and past hurts
 - Feels abandoned when others differ or separate
 - Pursues to address problems with complaints rather than requests
 - Arrivals/departures/ waiting for spouse to engage

8. **Vacillator:**
Anxiety relieved through anger
 - May pout or distance to show displeasure
 - Reviews event privately in thoughts and assigns motives and intentions to Avoider's actions
 - In private moments, shame over anger/words and feels unlovable

7. **Avoider: Triggered**
 - Shuts down and retreats
 - Gets busy with task or leaves

2. **Vacillator:** Vent or protest lowers anxiety. Moves from idealizing to devaluing.
 - Assumes spouse's motives to hurt

3. **Avoider:**
Stunned/triggered
 - What just happened?
 - Minimizes, defends
 - Believes Vacillator is too emotional/no empathy
 - Dismissive of feelings, pain or new idealistic ideas or crusades

4. **Vacillator:** Feels dismissed, invisible, misunderstood
 - Escalates, angry
 - Triggered, reactive flooded with emotion

5. **Avoider: Triggered**
 - Overwhelmed by emotional display and sees the Vacillator as unreasonable
 - Fight or flee

6. **Vacillator: Triggered**
 - Feels abandoned, intensifies feelings
 - Strong language, may threaten divorce
 - Devalues spouse and over time contempt and disgust for spouse

Attachment Core Pattern Therapy™ Interventions

Vacillator & Avoider

The VACILLATOR

- I've always been especially sensitive and perceptive and can tell when others are pulling away from me.
- I want more connection than my spouse wants and always seem to be waiting for time and attention.
- I feel like no one has really understood what I need.
- I make it obvious when I'm hurt and when no one pursues me to ask what's wrong, I feel even more upset.
- I am often disappointed and sometimes I get angry when my expectations aren't met.
- I have difficulty being willing to reengage when I'm angry and when my spouse makes an effort, I feel it's too little, too late.
- I don't like to be alone but often feel resentful and lonely when my spouse is around.
- I experience internal conflict and a high level of emotional stress in relationships and often feel misunderstood.
- At times, I find myself picking a fight and I'm not sure why.
- Others have said they feel like they can never please me.
- When people hurt me long enough, I write them off.
- I tend to reflect more on how others have hurt me rather than on my own shortcomings.
- I rehearse in my head how I hope things will go and I ruminate on events when they are over.

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.
- I try to avoid emotional confrontations 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 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 and have learned to take care of myself.
- I don't really miss my spouse or family if I'm away from them.

The Initial Attraction:

Avoiders can lack vitality because as children they learned to steer clear of emotions and neediness. They go through life in a “mid-range” existence, never too excited and never too dejected. The Vacillator, who is good at sparking an intense, passionate connection, is good at making the Avoider feel energized, noticed, understood and adored, feelings that were often lacking in their childhood home.

The Vacillator is attracted to the consistency, strength, and predictability of the Avoider, and enjoys being able to make them “respond.” A consistent, responsive parent was often lacking in the childhood home of the Vacillator. Initially, the Avoider’s stability and predictability keeps the Vacillator from having to be anxious over unexpected twists and turns in the relationship.

Overview of the Core Pattern:

As the love styles collide, the Avoider feels constantly “in trouble” for disappointing their spouse. The passionate connection and the intense good feelings of the early relationship are replaced with the Vacillator’s passionate anger, hurt and disappointment as “real life” sets in. As the Vacillator devalues the relationship, the Avoider retreats and reverts to the independent lifestyle they adopted in their childhood home.

The Vacillator feels devastated when the “passionate connection” is lost. They feel angry, betrayed, and abandoned as they discover the Avoider’s lack of ability to connect. They do not understand that because the Avoider never experienced close emotional connections growing up, they cannot understand or value what the Vacillator wants. Initially, Vacillators are willing to work hard to get the Avoider to respond and engage. Over time, however, they become increasingly angry when the Avoider is incapable of providing the consistent, passionate connection they desire. Unlike the Pleaser, they voice their anger, further driving the Avoider into a mode of retreat.

The Vacillator goes through a pattern of protest, despair and detachment over and over when their idealized hopes and dreams don’t materialize. Over time they may give up and detach and appear to be a detached Avoider when in fact they are a Vacillator who has given up hope.

When stuck in this Core Pattern, each person feels:**The Vacillator:**

- My spouse hurts me over and over.
- I feel empty and lonely, without a passionate connection.
- When I do see my spouse try, it feels like too little, too late.
- I can tell my spouse really doesn't want to be with me, especially if I'm upset.
- It feels like my spouse doesn't need me very much.
- If my spouse really loved me they would know what I need.
- Yes, I'm angry. Anyone would be angry in my situation.
- I'm not sure my spouse really loves me or wants me.

The Avoider:

- I feel as though I am "walking on egg shells" in my marriage.
- I get anxious at the inevitable blow up that is coming.
- No matter how hard I try, it is never enough.
- Relationships are too hard, so why try?
- I find excuses to be away from my spouse.
- I never know what to expect. It can be really good and suddenly it's very bad.
- My spouse is very reactive, and it annoys me.
- My spouse makes a big issue over the dumbest things.
- My spouse does not appreciate me or the hard work I do.

Following, we list the general individual growth goals for the Vacillator and the Avoider. 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 Vacillator: (see How We Love Workbook)

1. **Reflect.** Because I've focused on the behavior of others for such a long time, I realize that I am not used to looking at myself. As a result, my self-observation and reflection skills are lacking. With the Soul Word List as my constant companion, I will choose to spend time journaling trying to become aware of and describe the old, familiar reactive thoughts and feelings that build tension and anxiety.
2. **Look at roots.** Though painful, I will learn to connect the past to the present . . . to trace the history of my ruminations and obsessive thought patterns to historical origins. I will face my history of abandonment, chronic or acute, blatant or subtle.
3. **See and care for child within me.** I will have empathy for my little self who was hurt long ago. Remembering my little boy or girl is vital to the healing process. When I am

triggered by others, feeling lonely or insecure, I will say to my little child, “I see you . . . I remember your pain and won’t forget you are there.”

4. **Accept reality.** My irritability and agitation at the lack of “ideal” must be addressed. If things are “ideal,” then life can be pain free so idealization is a defense against pain. I will learn to say daily, “Today won’t be as good as I hope.” When things go wrong, I will say, “This is not as bad as I think it is.” These statements will help me live in reality. When I feel things are “all bad,” I will go on a “**good hunt**” looking for the positive in people or circumstances. By doing this I am seeking middle ground verses seeing things as “all good” or “all bad.”
5. **Own my triggers.** I will learn to accept my present day primary attachment figure (spouse) is inadvertently triggering an old wound sustained in my early childhood. I will empathize with the little self that was abandoned or unseen and realize his or her feelings and thoughts are still with me today. I’ll remember that my feelings are real and valid but my reactivity toward my spouse is turbo-charged as childhood feelings bleed into the present.
6. **Check out assumptions.** I will be open to the fact that many of my interpretations of other’s motivations and intentions are often erroneous and not based in reality. I will check out my assumptions instead of assuming they are facts.
7. **Tolerate differences.** My childhood injuries intensify my sensitivity causing me to become easily hurt and highly reactive. I will learn to accept different ideas and perspectives of my spouse as a part of life rather than a personal rejection.
8. **Be curious.** I will accept the truth that others will not feel or think the same way I do. I will choose to be curious and ask about differing opinions and values and allow others to influence my perspective.
9. **Accept mistakes.** I will be more tolerant of both my mistakes and the mistakes of others. If my mistakes felt shameful as a child, I will strive to embrace the truth that “brokenness” is an adult reality. I will accept an integrated view of myself and others and resist the temptation toward the extremes of idealizing and devaluing. (Everyone, everything, every day is good and bad.)
10. **Be vulnerable.** I will use my anger as a red flag that I missed identifying and communicating more vulnerable feelings that preceded my anger. I will use the Soul Word List to identify these feelings instead of using anger as a defense against feeling.
11. **Ask directly.** When I need something I will ask directly for it rather than expecting my spouse to “get it” and read my mind. I will let go of the ideal belief that if they loved me they would just “know”. I will make request instead of complaints.
12. **Get input.** If I decide to take on a new challenge or direction, I will invite my family members to join me, and if they choose not to do so, I will not insist they comply. I will not force a family direction unless my spouse is in full agreement and is not yielding under pressure and duress. I will remember new projects are often a way of coping with my own restless anxiety. I will discover and share my anxieties.
13. **Arrivals and departures:** I will see my idealism contributes to my expectations around arrivals and departures. At arrivals, I hope for ideal connection. Departures can trigger feelings of anxiety and abandonment.

14. **Rehearsing and reviewing:** I will become aware of my tendency to rehearse future events and review past events. This contributes to my anxiety. I will ask for help or distract myself rather than ruminate about hurts and problems.

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 Word 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 Vacillator/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 9. 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 the Vacillator or Avoider 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. The goal is to recognize the pressure building in Step 1 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: Vacillator has a buildup of anxiety and tension:

1. **Vacillator:**
Anxiety & Tension Build Up Due To:
 - *Idealizing/disappointment*
 - *Preoccupied with relational closeness/distances and ruminates on desired outcomes and past hurts*
 - *Feels abandoned when others differ or separate*
 - *Pursues to address problems with complaints rather than requests*
 - *Arrivals/departures/ waiting for spouse to engage*

What's going on?

1. *Idealizing/disappointment*

- In attachment research, Vacillators are referred to as preoccupied or ambivalent. They suffer from an almost constant state of internal **agitation, anxiety and tension**. This began long ago when, as a child, they experienced inconsistent connection, subtle or blatant abandonment, and feelings of being misunderstood, unseen or unwanted. Since childhood, their mind has been preoccupied with figuring out "What's going on?", "What did they mean by that?", "When will someone see me?" or "Does anyone know I feel alone and scared?"
- With this emotional backdrop, they enter adulthood continuing to ruminate and obsess about relationships, hoping for ideal connection with fairy tale endings. Fearing rejection, the Vacillator is hyper-sensitive to closeness and distance. Just as in childhood, they continue to interpret the motives and intentions of others. We call this "reviewing and rehearsing," internal dialogues of rehearsing idealized hopes and reviewing current and past hurts and disappointments caused by people and institutions.
- Silently, they try to make sense of the behaviors of others, coming to conclusions that are assumptions, not facts. Without checking out assumptions, they frequently attribute incorrect motives and intentions to the behaviors of others.

2. *Preoccupied with relational closeness/distance and ruminates on desired outcomes and past hurts*

- As a child, Vacillators consciously or unconsciously fantasized about the future, an ideal world where love is constant. They maintain the quest for intense connection until the realities of adult romantic relationships bring the idealized future to a screeching halt.
- Instead of *embracing* the reality of a broken world and lowering idealism to realistic expectations, they blame the person(s) who "spoiled" their ideal picture and believe the spouse is the problem. They struggle to accept the reality that the world is broken and real life falls short of ideal so they are chronically frustrated by the gap between ideal and real.
- Vacillators are also called "ambivalent" and "preoccupied" in the attachment research. They seem happy and close one moment and sullen and withdrawn the next. They become reactive very quickly and are prone to angry outbursts which relieve the internal tension, agitation and anxiety that builds as they ruminate over disappointments in people's behavior. When angry or hurt, they move from an idealized view to an "all bad" devaluation of others attacking and withdrawing from those around them.
- With low levels of self-awareness, they are unable to put into words the vulnerable feelings of fear and anxiety they feel when they are disappointed by others.

3. Feels abandoned when others differ or separate

- Perceptions of abandonment, ever so slight, will trigger the Vacillator. This includes differing opinions, values, thoughts, feeling states, levels of concern, likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams.
- Practically speaking, they don't allow others to individuate and differentiate. To the Vacillator, a different view is experienced as personal rejection.

4. Pursues to address problems with complaints rather than requests

- Vacillators complain and blame when others make them feel "bad". They want their spouse to "mind read" and instinctively know how to make them feel good, wanted, understood and valued. They have an aversion to asking directly for what they want and need.
- Conversely, they are not open to any hint of criticism or opposition toward themselves. As a result, their spouses view them as the kings and queens of double standard.

5. Arrivals/departures/waiting for spouse to engage

- Relational departures and arrivals are fraught with internal conflict . . . "Will you miss me/think about me?" Vacillators will often pick a fight to make the departure easier.
- When the reunion approaches, the Vacillator anticipates a euphoric connection and if the reception of the other person is lackluster, the Vacillator is very disappointed.

NOTE: The preoccupied or ambivalent attachment style (Vacillator) exists on a continuum of mild, moderate to extreme. Serotonin elevating antidepressants are often helpful in reducing anxiety, intrusive thoughts and ruminations (symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder).

Step 2: The Vacillator's release of anxiety through anger:

3. Vacillator: Vent or protest lowers anxiety. Moves from idealizing to devaluing.

- Assumes spouse's motives to intentionally hurt.

What's going on?

1. The agitation and buildup of anxiety and tension erupts most often (without warning) on family members, especially the spouse. The attack includes accusations, assumptions of motives, judgments about intentions as well as a historical recounting of all other offenses that resemble the current transgression.

2. The Vacillator's emotional mood shifts are sudden, strong and powerful. Inwardly, they have gone to an all dark place that surprises and scares those around them.
3. The emotional "discharge" may include a sudden and intense commitment to a cause, crusade, fad, or new direction. These new directions provide distraction and relief from the misery of the Vacillator's anxious ruminating and obsessing. The Vacillator is NOT aware that they release anxiety through angry venting. Rather they feel their anger is justified as their spouse has made them feel "bad." They report feeling better after they vent.
4. These causes, crusades and fads are attempts to reach toward a more ideal state of existence. Common examples: "I'm going to get in shape and run the Boston Marathon!", "We're going to adopt or become foster parents!", "I'm putting our kids in a private school!", "I'm going to home school the kids!" and "Our family is going to become vegetarian!" (NOTE: We are not in opposition to any of these choices.)
5. When opposed, the Vacillator will say, "I have been thinking about this for a long time and I've decided what is best. To oppose or disagree with my view is to betray and abandon me."
6. Fearful family members will often go along with the idea because they don't want to oppose the Vacillator and cause further anger. While the family may appear compliant, in reality, they may resent the new direction but don't want to anger the Vacillator by resisting or disagreeing.
7. When family members, especially the spouse, lose enthusiasm for the cause, the Vacillator feels betrayed and abandoned. If the spouse remains opposed, the Vacillator parent may pull the children into the "new direction," triangulating with the kids against the spouse.

Step 3: Avoider dismisses:

3: Avoider:
Stunned/Triggered

- *What just happened?*
- *Minimizes, defends*
- *Believes Vacillator is too emotional/no empathy*
- *Dismissive of feelings, pain or new grand ideas*

What's going on?

1. Avoiders are not emotionally in tune with their own emotions, let alone the emotions of others. Lacking self-awareness and other attunement, they have little to no

awareness of the fluctuating emotional states of others. Lacking empathy for emotional distress, they fail to see the preoccupied state of their spouse and are clueless about all that is going on inside the minds and souls of others.

2. When the preoccupied Vacillator is quiet, the Avoider assumes “all is well.” Because Avoiders are not hyper-vigilant about closeness and distance in relationships, it rarely crosses their minds to inquire about what is going on inside another’s mind. Consequently they “miss” a lot of emotional and relational dynamics that are going on around them.
3. Missing cues and naïvely ignoring the quiet before the storm, the Avoider is stunned and shocked when the Vacillator discharges or lashes out at them.
4. They are instantly triggered and defensive. Their first response is to somehow “flee” the situation and escape the emotional distress as quickly as possible. Their instinctive tactics are:
 - To be dismissive of the Vacillator’s thoughts, feelings, emotions or opinions.
 - To minimize the issue as not important or critical. They will see the Vacillator as over reactive and will try to talk them down from their level of intensity.
 - To defend their view as reasonable, logical and correct.
 - To counterbalance the Vacillator’s viewpoint with an alternate view in hopes of pulling the Vacillator back to the middle.
 - To tell the Vacillator to “Settle down!” (In the words of Scooby Doo, “Rut Roh.”)
 - To lash out angrily, hoping to instantaneously squelch the negative emotions.

Step 4: Vacillator escalates:

4. Vacillator: Feels
dismissed, invisible,
misunderstood

- *Escalates, angry*
- *Triggered : reactive,
flooded with
emotions*

What's going on? The Avoider's instinctive emotional reflexes only escalate the Vacillator's fury and reactivity.

1. If the Vacillator feels invisible, dismissed or misunderstood, their reactivity will further escalate.
2. The Vacillator will accuse the spouse of “not caring about them” and will be further triggered and more reactive.

Step 5: Avoider fights & flees:**5: Avoider: Triggered**

- *Overwhelmed by emotional display and sees the Vacillator as unreasonable*
- *Fight or flee*

What's going on?

1. The Avoider gets further triggered and overwhelmed and lashes out in anger and leaves the presence of the Vacillator if they are physically able or they may skip the anger, detach and go away.

Step 6: Vacillator's black & white statements:**6: Vacillator: Triggered**

- *Feels abandoned, intensifies feelings*
- *Strong language may threaten divorce*
- *Devalues spouse and over time contempt and disgust for spouse*

What's going on?

1. This is the pinnacle of the emotional reactivity in which the only way the Vacillator can relieve the frustration is to make global statements like, “It’s over! I’m done! I’m getting a divorce!” Having fully split into an “all bad” state, they devalue the spouse to such an extreme level that all they feel is contempt and disgust for the spouse.
2. In some cases, the reactivity can build toward rage. Occasionally the Vacillator can become physically violent with the spouse hitting, slapping, throwing or breaking things.

Step 7: Avoider shuts down:**7: Avoider: Triggered**

- *Shuts down and retreats, detaches*
- *Gets busy with task or leaves*

What's going on?

1. Avoider flees, or may be angry and fight.
2. Avoider detaches and is non expressive or exits without any explanation.

Step 8: Vacillator's calm after the storm:**8: Vacillator:****Anxiety relieved through anger**

- *May pout or distance to show displeasure*
- *Reviews event privately in thoughts and assigns motives and intentions to Avoider's actions*
- *In private moments shame over anger/words*

What's going on?

1. After the explosive reactions subside, the exhausted Vacillator retreats into the old familiar inner world of reviewing and rehearsing in which they see themselves as the victim.
2. They assign negative motives to the Avoider as a means of comforting themselves and justifying their actions.
3. Vacillators may feel guilt and shame for their behaviors and reactions but rarely disclose this to anyone.

Step 9: Avoider waits:

9: Avoider:
Waits for Vacillator to “get over it”

- *No resolution*
- *When Vacillator reengages, family complies and acts like nothing happened.*

What's going on?

1. The Avoider does what he or she has always done; they “wait it out” and when the storm is over and some sign of normalcy appears, they reengage and “comply” with the Vacillator’s positive mood shift while simultaneously hiding and stuffing their own feelings.
2. Absolutely no resolution or repair takes place and the Avoider never readdresses the question, “What happened?” The kids feelings are often ignored if they witnessed the episode.

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 Avoider 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: Vacillator’s tension builds toward anger**Step 1: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:**

Look for what caused the build-up of tension and anxiety (described in Box 1) and identify what feelings preceded the anger such as hurt, fear, shame and embarrassment. (Use the list of soul words).

- a. Did I idealize something? Were my expectations too high? Am I angry because I am disappointed?
- b. Am I preoccupied about something? Have I been rehearsing and reviewing and is my preoccupation resulting in a short fuse? Did someone interrupt my preoccupation? If so, can I share the anxiety this preoccupation is causing?
- c. Do I feel abandoned? Did I feel this same feeling as a child? Is my spouse getting the anger that partly belongs to someone in my past?
- d. Did I make a complaint that could have been a request?

- e. Am I triggered by an arrival or departure? These are areas of sensitivity for me. Is that the trigger?
- 1. Ask your spouse to engage in the Comfort Circle and listen to the hurts as opposed to waiting for the tension to build and then attacking the person who triggered the feelings. "Honey I am feeling anxious and I don't want it to turn into anger. Can we do the Comfort Circle so I can sort out my feelings?"
- 2. Your reactivity and flare-ups further alienate those you love sabotaging the very closeness you desire.
- 3. When you feel dark, (everything is bad) go on a "good hunt" to look for the good within yourself and others. Ask your spouse to help you see the good. This is very important in learning to integrate good and bad which will in turn regulate your mood. You are happy when it's ideal and good. You are angry when someone spoils the ideal picture and that person becomes "all bad". Start each day with, "Today won't be as good as I think it will." When something goes wrong, "This is not as bad as I think it is."
- 4. Your Avoider spouse won't "just get you" so be direct and ask for what you want instead of hoping "they will just know."
- 5. Be patient with your Avoider spouse, realizing that emotional engagement is new and intimidating to them. They may not be as skilled as you would like them to be as a listener. Give them a chance to improve over time. Appreciate and praise their efforts.
- 6. Be curious and explore your spouse's history to understand to have compassion for the root of their Avoider tendencies. This behavior was learned before they ever met you and isn't meant to personally hurt and irritate you. Pleasing is the way they coped as a child.

Examples for Vacillator: I would like to do the Comfort Circle because:

- "I really got triggered this morning when we were talking to the neighbor. She did not seem to acknowledge me and I felt invisible and shameful."
- "I would love to share a hope or dream with you that I have been thinking about. I am open to your opinions and feedback."
- "I feel my anxiety building and want help with my tension before it turns to anger."
- "I feel myself shifting to a dark place. Can you help me process my feelings?"
- "I've been ruminating and obsessing about something all day. "I need to go around the Comfort Circle. When is a good time for you?"

Notice these are all "I" statements, not "you" statements.

Step 1: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern: (for more detail, see the HWL Workbook chapter on growth goals for the Avoider):

If the Avoider understands what is happening **before** the Vacillator's anger erupts, the pattern can be stopped sooner.

1. **The Avoider can help the Vacillator in Step 1 by observing.** Pay more attention to observing your Vacillator spouse and studying them. Look for opportunities to listen and comfort rather than avoid. How does your Vacillator spouse act when tension is building as described in Step 1. Learn to intervene before the anger. You might say:
 - a. You seem preoccupied. What are you thinking about and what are you feeling?
 - b. I know you feel abandoned when I leave. I want to reassure you that you matter to me.
 - c. I am coming home and I had a hard day so I may need some space before I can engage and share.
 - d. I know you hope this will be a perfect evening (vacation, date, event etc.) but just remember, something usually goes wrong. We will get through it and find the good again.
 - e. Could you turn that complaint into a request? It would be easier for me to respond to a request instead of a complaint.
2. When your spouse is ruminating and preoccupied, remember not to default into the deeply engrained tendency to avoid conflict and negative emotions.
3. Engage with your spouse by becoming proactive as opposed to the typical pattern of avoiding emotions. Explain, "This makes me uncomfortable but I will try to listen to your feelings."
4. Use the list of soul words and initiate the Comfort Circle, asking your spouse to pick three feelings and share what is causing those feelings. The goal is to discover the buildup of anxiety **before** it turns to anger. Try to be attentive and watchful, looking for stress responses and the buildup of tension and anxiety described in Step 1.
5. If your spouse seems preoccupied say, "You seem preoccupied and upset. Are you anxious about something?" If so, invite them to go around the Comfort Circle.
6. Ask the Vacillator to make an "I feel and I need" statement or make a request versus complaints and criticisms.
7. Seek to explore the childhood experiences in your own history and in my spouse's history that shaped these harmful love styles. (See workbook in HWL for questions).

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 2: Vacillator's anger erupts often without warning

Step 2: Vacillator: Individual action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

1. **Own anger** Communication with harsh tones and mean, unkind words is not OK. It will never get you what you hope for. If you have an outburst, take a time out and breathe until you are calm. Then go back to **each family member** within ear shot and say: "I am

sorry for my anger. I would like a “do-over”. I am trying to learn better ways.” Learn to be to be really brave and ask, “How did my anger make you feel?”

1. **Initiate a “do-over”** and try again using the Comfort Circle as a format. Remember to focus on feelings under the anger. Review what was going on in Step 1 before you got angry.
2. Make a request rather than a complaint.
3. To prevent flare-ups, observe your emotional states and assess on a 1-10 scale the buildup of anxiety and tension. Keep in mind that you felt this way before you met your spouse.
4. Don’t expect your Avoider spouse to mind read. Tell your spouse what you feel and be direct. You can formulate your thoughts into a statement: “I feel _____ and I need _____.”

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

Don’t run but don’t fight: You must draw a boundary and refuse to listen to angry outbursts. It’s not good for you or the kids. If you want to be respected learn to say:

- “I can see you are very angry. I want to listen when you can tell me in a calm way the feelings under your anger. Let me know when you are ready.”
- Stick to this boundary and learn to tolerate the silence or anger of your mate without fixing or pleasing to make the anger go away.

EXITING THE CORE PATTERN STEP 3: Avoider surprised, stunned

Step 3: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

Tell your spouse, “I am getting triggered and feeling overwhelmed and I need 20 minutes to let things calm down.” Then:

1. Tell your spouse, “Let’s slow down the process so that I can hear you out. I will get the Soul Words List so you can help me understand the feelings underneath the anger.”
2. Ask your spouse to remember your Avoider injuries and carefully choose their words, realizing that anger and intensity further shut you down.
3. Try not to debate the details or defend erroneous or fallacious accusations. Get off the thinking mode and out of the “courtroom” into the empathy mode. Lean in to the Vacillator with empathy and learn to say things like:
 - “Wow! Something hurts!” Can you pick three feelings off the Soul Words List?
 - “You must have gotten triggered by something... sit down and tell me about it.”
 - “You’ve been quiet, so tell me what’s been going on in your thoughts and emotions?”
 - “I may not agree with all your conclusions and opinions, but you are valuable to me so I will listen.”

4. Try to tolerate a wide range of emotions rather than running away.
5. Choose to remember there is a hurt little child inside. Ask, "When did you have these same three feelings as a kid? Gently remind them that their past hurts are bleeding into the present
6. Seek to understand and comfort the childhood wounds that make your mate so sensitive to abandonment. Make it safe for them to grieve these childhood hurts instead of being mad. As grief increases, anger decreases. Grief heals, anger festers.
7. In calm moments tie the present feelings to the childhood experience where the feelings began. "You are very angry at me right now; did someone in the past hurt you in a similar manner? Perhaps I am getting some of the anger you never expressed to them."

EXITING THE CORE PATTERN AT STEP 4: Vacillator's anger intensifies

Step 4: Vacillator: Individual action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

When you don't get the response you hope for your tendency is to get angrier and feel devalued and misunderstood. Remember this reactivity started in childhood when perhaps you were misunderstood. Maybe your family growing up handled anger in hurtful ways. Once you are triggered the past floods into the present. If you are at Step 4, take a time out and review how this is happening. Your anger makes it far less likely that you will be understood

1. Ask for a do-over and try again. "I am sorry for my anger. Can we have a do-over and I will share my more vulnerable feelings?"
2. Go back and ask, "What happened in Step 1? What do I feel and need? What request can I make?"
3. ALWAYS apologize for anger expressed in hurtful ways. Ask your spouse or kids how your words made them feel. Own your hurtful behavior and seek to repair. This is a vital part of your growth so don't skip this step.

EXITING THE CORE PATTERN AT STEP 5: The Avoider is triggered and sees the Vacillator as unreasonable. The Avoider either plans the escape route or engage begins an angry defense.

Step 5: Avoider: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

If you want to fight:

Anger breeds anger. Engaging in anger and fighting back only prolongs the predictable bad ending to this pattern. Disengage in a mature way:

- "I'm not going to fight. I am taking a time out and when we are both calm we can try a do-over."
- If you engage now you too should apologize.

If you want to flee:

1. Admit when you are overwhelmed and ask for a time out and assuring your spouse you will reengage when things are calmer.
2. Reflect on how dismissing and minimizing your contribution is to the continuation of the Core Pattern. Tell your spouse, "This is when I want to detach. After we calm down I want to try and listen. I feel inadequate but I want to try."
3. When you are not in the Core Pattern look for ways to show empathy and offer to hold your spouse and listen to their childhood pain. You can engage while admitting your discomfort with strong emotions.
4. When your spouse is calm, Initiate the Comfort Circle. Ask the Vacillator to share their feelings from Step 1. Look your spouse in the eye, move physically closer to them and with empathy ask, "What hurts inside?" If they complain and blame ask your Vacillator spouse to make a statement using the format... "I feel _____ I need _____."
5. If the Vacillator cannot share in a calmer way call another time out.

Step 5: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

Sometimes Vacillators pick fights and push their spouse to become angry in order to **MAKE them feel something**. For a Vacillator, an intense fight is better than nothing. You may succeed in getting your spouse to be angry but ultimately it will make the Avoider further distance and disengage in the calm times. They will think more about leaving which is the abandonment you fear. Fighting is a destructive way to feel close.

EXITING THE CORE PATTERN AT STEP 6: The Vacillator's anger increases and hurtful things are said. Many times the Vacillator says, "I'm done," and leaves in an angry huff.

For a Vacillator the past is now flooding into the present. Historical hurt is mixed with present day hurt.

Step 6: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

1. **Ask for a time out.** If you don't stop the anger, this will end badly. If necessary, leave the house to grieve, cry, pray, exercise, or call a friend until the intensity subsides.
2. **Don't storm out.** Own your anger. "I need to calm myself down. I will be back and when I can talk calmly."
3. **Link the past to the present.** Say to yourself, "I must not let historical rage dominate the present. My reaction does not match the infraction. I've felt this reactive for as long as I can remember before I met my spouse. I am causing damage to everyone in the house with anger and threats."

4. **Apologize.** If you have made black and white statements or said mean things an apology is even more necessary. An apology doesn't mean you are a bad person and it's entirely your fault. It's simply taking responsibility for hurtful words. In addition, it's one of the most important things you can model for your kids. We all make mistakes and when we do it's time to apologize.
5. **Repair** the damage instead of just moving on. Ask your spouse and kids how your behavior made them feel and seek to hear their heart considering their feelings as important as your own.
6. **Compassion:** Remember your Avoider spouse did not explore or process his or her feelings growing up. Your emotions are overwhelming them.
7. **Don't justify:** More anger will never promote more closeness. You are sabotaging the very connection you desire. If you anger feels "justified" you have lost all perspective of the history that generated these feelings.

EXITING THE CORE PATTER Step 7: Avoider detaches and exits

Step 7: Avoider: Individual action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

This is the point where you decide your spouse is crazy and you are exiting. Emotions don't make someone crazy. A home where emotions are ignored is not a healthy home.

Try to:

1. Resist "fleeing and avoiding" but rather, establish appropriate boundaries with opportunity to re-connect if boundaries are respected.
2. Remember, your spouse is sensitive and feels things deeply. Ask to hear the hurt under the anger. Try to keep in mind the hurt child inside your spouse.
3. Initiate a do-over when your spouse calms down. Don't always make them do the pursuing.
4. Apologize for your part of the Core Pattern and the impact of avoiding your spouse's emotions.
5. If your spouse is verbally abusive, walk away and tell them that you will return when they have calmed down. If they are physically abusive, leave the house and call 911.
6. Take the children instead of leaving them at home and abandoning them. If you want out of the house don't you think your kids do as well? Don't bad mouth your spouse to the kids but do listen to their feelings about what just happened. Even little kids can tell you more than you might imagine.

EXITING THE CORE PATTERN STEP 8: Vacillator feels better as anger has released their built up anxiety but may pout and distance for a time

Step 8: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

1. **Anger traumatizes others.** While you may feel relief after venting the tension from Step 1, you must realize others in the home were traumatized by the experience.
2. **Apologize** and ask family members how your anger made them feel and listen without being defensive.
3. **Don't belittle.** Do not vilify your spouse or tell the children they should be on your side. Disgust is a marriage killer. Own the history that underlies your reactivity.
4. **Don't Ruminate.** The tendency at this point is to review the scenario over and over making the spouse all bad and justifying your anger. This never helps!! Go on a good hunt. Your spouse is not all bad. Ruminating only increases anger and hurt.
5. **Shame.** If you feel at fault or guilt because your anger was out of line, you may experience shame and disgust with yourself. People don't realize you are as hard on yourself as you are on others. This is a very private, painful place of rumination for the Vacillator with a big "NO ENTRANCE" sign in front of it. These are feelings you likely felt growing up. "What's wrong with me? Why can't anyone love me and understand me? I am a bother. I am too needy." **The goal is to share these feelings of vulnerability with your spouse. Share the childhood memories at the root of these feelings and how you re-experience these feelings in the present.** Now the focus is on your pain, not what your spouse did wrong. This is the scariest and most important step for you. You need comfort for the childhood pain.

EXITING THE CORE PATTERN STEP 9: The Avoider is passive until things blow over and doesn't readdress the problem. The Vacillator eventually reengages and acts like nothing ever happened. No resolution.

Step 9: Avoider: Individual action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

Avoider acts like nothing ever happened and waits for the Vacillator to reengage. Eventually the Vacillator reengages and acts like "nothing ever happened." There is no resolution.

1. Resist the temptation to wait until things cool down. Tolerating your spouse's rudeness and minimizing the damage caused by your spouse's anger is damaging to everyone in the home.
2. Apologize for your contribution to the dance. Avoiding emotions has not helped your sensitive spouse. Ask for an apology if your spouse's anger has been hurtful.
3. Make every attempt to reengage and ask your spouse about the original hurts and anxieties (Step 1) that activated the pattern. Share your own feelings about being the brunt of their anger.
4. In calmer moments, firmly, yet gently, explain to the Vacillator their double standards or describe the areas where they can't see the impact of their anger. Mirror back to them how the intensity of their rage does not match the offense.

5. When you are not in the pattern take opportunities to build non-sexual nurture and comfort. Encourage them to cry about childhood hurts. The more they grieve the less angry the Vacillator will be.
6. Regularly confess your own shortcomings and share how your pattern of avoidance has been hurtful across the span of the relationship.

Milan & Kay Yerkovich

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