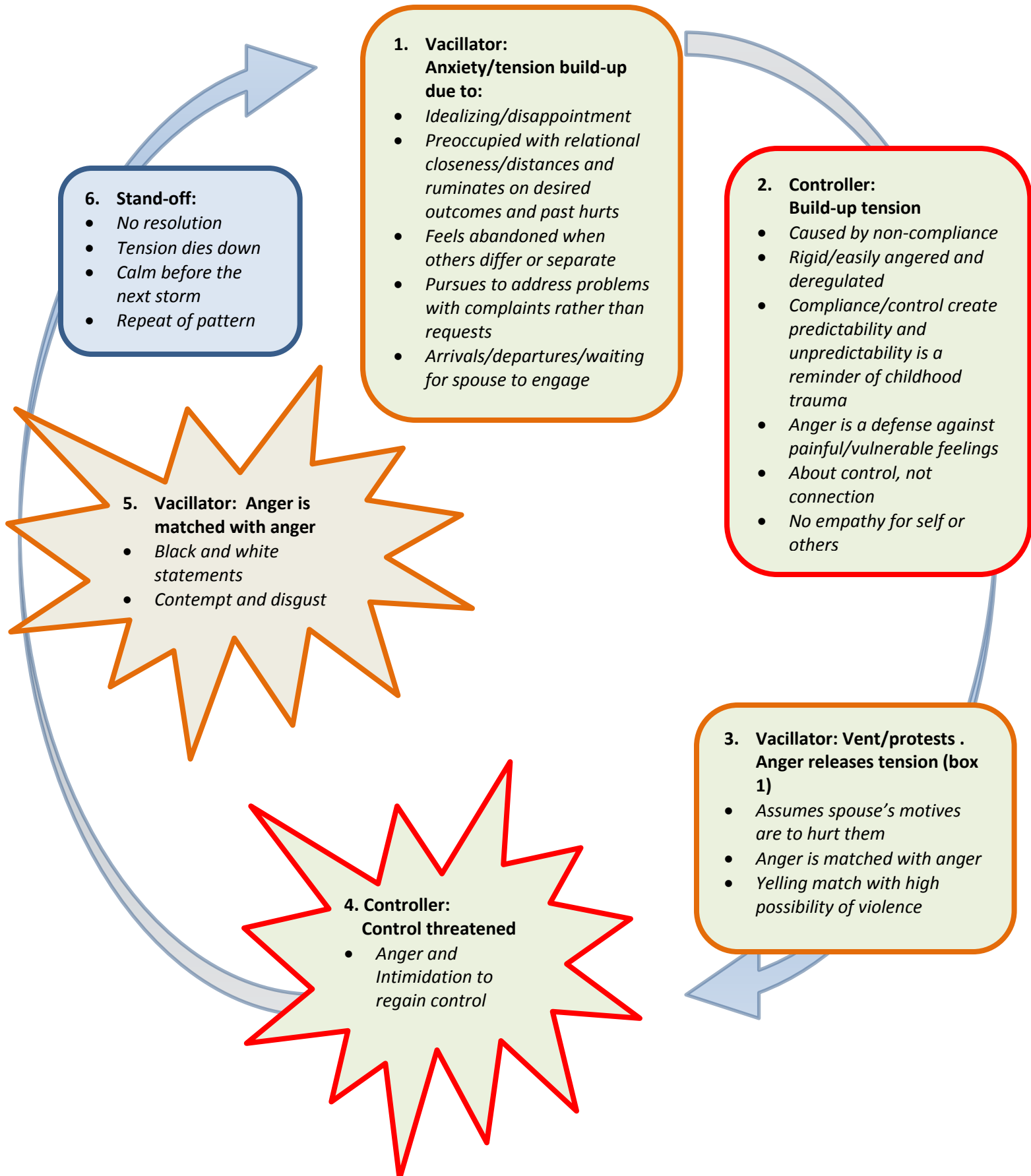


ATTACHMENT CORE PATTERN THERAPY™

VACILLATOR/CONTROLLER CORE PATTERN

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Attachment Core Pattern Therapy™ Interventions

Vacillator & Controller

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 are not 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 CONTROLLER

- Growing up, I experienced a great deal of intense anger and stress from a parent(s) or sibling(s).
- No one protected me from harm when I was growing up so I had to get tough and take care of myself.
- Life has taught me to either "be in control" or "be controlled."
- If I wasn't in charge, nothing would get done.
- Sometimes I try to control my temper but I feel too angry to stop.
- My spouse couldn't survive without me.
- People would probably describe me as intimidating.
- I rarely feel any emotion except anger and sometimes guilt if my anger has gone too far.
- Things would go more smoothly if my spouse (and kids) listened to me and did the things I asked.
- My spouse purposely makes me jealous and does things behind my back.
- I have few feelings about my childhood except I'm glad it's over.

Initial Attraction:

Vacillators are charming, engaging and make a Controller feel wanted and valued. This is enticing for the Controller who often survived a lot of chaos during childhood. The Vacillator likes to be taken care of and the Controller often easily slips into this role with their high need to manage their world. Vacillators idealize new relationships and tend to ignore red flags. When the Controller's anger becomes apparent, Vacillators minimize the Controller's reactivity and view control as protection. Controllers are powerful and Vacillators like intensity so the early relationship may be passionate and guarded with a jealous protectiveness by each partner.

Overview of the Core Pattern

Both the Vacillator and the Controller mistake intensity for intimacy. Often, that was their experience growing up. Fighting or intense arguing is a connection of sorts, in that two people are engaged but what is lacking is the ability to regulate emotions and reach a resolution where both people feel heard, understood and valued. In many homes, there is intense fighting without resolution. Everyone just moves on even though no one was truly heard, nor was the problem resolved.

It may appear these two like to fight when in fact it's just the only way they have experienced connection. Both like to be right, both move quickly to anger and both are stubborn and determined. The making up after a fight may be just as intense and sexual encounters are often used to "make peace". Both spouses likely have come from homes where arguing and fighting were a part of normal everyday life so neither sees the destructiveness of the Core Pattern, especially for the kids. This is one of the most volatile combinations and the kids suffer as a result.

The Vacillator's tension builds up when they feel hurt, abandoned or misunderstood. The Controller's tension builds up whenever their control is threatened. It's easy to see how a spark can quickly start a fire.

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

- Sometimes I pick a fight and I'm not sure why.
- My spouse is mean and verbally abusive.
- I'd rather die than back down.
- Sometimes I lose hope and pull away for awhile.

The Controller:

- My spouse tries to manipulate me.
- Everything would be fine if my spouse would do what I say but they have to have the last word.

- My spouse tries to make me jealous.
- My spouse hides things from me and lies.

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 Words 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 Words 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 requests 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 Controller: (see How We Love Workbook)

1. **Feeling under the anger:** I will learn to identify feelings that underlie the anger. The only emotions the Controller is aware of are frustration and anger. Anger covers more vulnerable feelings that felt unbearable in childhood. Fear, shame, humiliation, loneliness, despair, may be just a few of the feelings you had little to no help managing during a difficult childhood. Control keeps you safe from having to feel vulnerable feelings. Use the feelings word list (freebie on the website) to begin to communicate the feelings under the anger.
2. **Grief:** I will allow the grief I couldn't allow as a child and learn to grieve with people who can comfort me and give me what my parents could not provide. There is often a lot of trauma in a chaotic home but no place to grieve or receive comfort. Grief is the antidote to anger. Anger is a defense that keeps that pain out of awareness. Feeling the pain as you recall childhood events in a comforting and supporting place may help you receive the comfort you missed as a child. The wounds begin to heal and the defense becomes unnecessary.
3. **Denial:** I will acknowledge the reality of the pain in my childhood and the impact of the trauma I suffered. People from chaotic homes tell horrendous childhood stories with a smile. They often minimize trauma believing it was normal. “I survived; it wasn't that bad,” is a phrase we hear over and over.
4. **Compassion for the child you once were:** I will learn to have compassion for the child I once was. You cannot have compassion for the hardships you endured if you deny and minimize the impact. You must remember what it was like to be a child or you will

traumatize your own children in the same way and not be aware of the damage you are doing.

5. **Respect vs threats:** I will watch my voice tone and learn to communicate without intimidation. You can demand respect, make threats and intimidate, but if you do, the respect of others will be based on fear. It's hypocritical to yell and raise your voice and be furious with others when they do the same thing. Respect breeds respect. Listen to your voice tones and learn to speak in a gentle kind way. Apologize when you go back to old habits.
6. **Apologize:** I will take responsibility for my anger and see the damage it causes to my relationships. I will apologize for how I have hurt others in the past and let them explain how my anger makes them feel.
7. **Time-outs:** I will take time-outs when I feel the anger building and use the feelings word list to communicate the vulnerable feelings under the anger.
8. **Listen:** I will learn to listen calmly even if I disagree. Controllers don't listen, they tell. Your perspective isn't the only view. Learn to stay in the listener role and not be scared off by tears or vulnerable emotions.
9. **Comfort:** As I learn to recognize more vulnerable emotions under the anger, I will admit my need for comfort and allow my spouse to comfort me. For most Controllers, there are no memories of comfort from childhood. Learn to recognize when you are stressed and anger is building. Ask for comfort rather than getting angry.
10. **Address addictions:** I will admit my addiction(s) and seek relational comfort verses gaining relief through my addictions. Addictions relieve pain and stress. You cannot let go of them until you can go to people for help rather than things. Consider a 12-step group or find a Celebrate Recovery group in your local church.
11. **Find a mentor:** I will accept my need for re-parenting and seek a mentor. You cannot heal alone. You need a mentor or sponsor who can be a support as you attempt to grow. Asking for help is essential to healing.

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/Controller 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 6. What is happening in each step is explained under the next section “**What’s going on?**” Then, **individual action steps and couple action steps** are listed that either the Vacillator or Controller 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.

The Vacillator/Controller Core Pattern is one of the most loud, augmentative, intense, and unpredictable Core Patterns. If the couple has kids, they suffer the most.

Both the Controller and Vacillator use anger as their primary defense. The reason for the Vacillator’s anger is most often due to a lack of connection, disappointments or feeling unseen or misunderstood. The Controller’s anger is most often triggered by non-compliance or jealousy. Both the Vacillator and Controller use anger to block the grief of painful childhood experiences. Both must commit to understanding and grieving childhood wounds so they no longer have to defend with anger.

This is a difficult pattern to overcome unless both spouses are willing to acknowledge their part of the pattern and make efforts to change. Grief is an important part of changing the pattern. It is very helpful for both the Vacillator and Controller to have a sponsor or mentor they can call to help them get back on track when triggered by their spouse.

Both the Controller and the Vacillator styles exist on a continuum from mild or moderate to severe. Serotonin elevating antidepressants are often helpful in reducing anxiety, intrusive thoughts and rumination (symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder). When children grow up in difficult homes, their brain chemistry is affected. If reactivity is high, the proper medications to normalize brain chemistry can be extremely helpful.

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

Step 1: Vacillators build-up of 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 this quest for intense connection

until disappointing 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 their 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” 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 aversity 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 standards.

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.

Step 2: The Controller's tension builds**2. Controller:****Build-up tension**

- *Caused by non-compliance*
- *Rigid/easily angered and deregulated*
- *Compliance/control create predictability and unpredictability is a reminder of childhood trauma*
- *Anger is a defense against painful/vulnerable feelings*
- *About control not connection*
- *Little to no empathy for self or others*

What's going on?

1. People from homes where there is “fright without solutions” (Mary Main) often become chaotic and disorganized as adults or become highly rigid. Because security was never experienced, they have no innate cognitive or emotional understanding of healthy emotions and relationships. Rigid Controllers tend to latch on to highly systematized and regulated guidelines for living life, spending money and parenting. When people move outside their prescribed and predictable behaviors or compliance is compromised, the Controller is easily overwhelmed and becomes angry.
2. Unpredictability and behavioral surprises of the Vacillator remind the Controller of the childhood trauma they once experienced. Thus, they are quick to force compliance and control to ease their internal distress.
3. Anger and rage function as a relief valve to their own build-up of tension as well as a show of force intimidating those under them. Anger also keeps the terrifying and vulnerable emotions lying underneath the anger from coming to the surface. As children, Controllers experienced many painful feelings (terror, humiliation, panic, confusion, betrayal) and vow to never experience these feelings as adults. The non-compliance of others threatens to put them in a one down position where childhood feelings might be re-experienced. Anger and control function as a defense against re-experiencing childhood pain.
4. Controllers never received comfort or empathy as kids. As adults they have little to no empathy for themselves or others and life is about control and not connection.

Step 3: Vacillators' discharge of anxiety and tension:**3. Vacillator: Vent/protests.****Anger releases tension (box 1)**

- *Assumes spouse's motives are to hurt them*
- *Anger is matched with anger*
- *Yelling match with high possibility of violence*

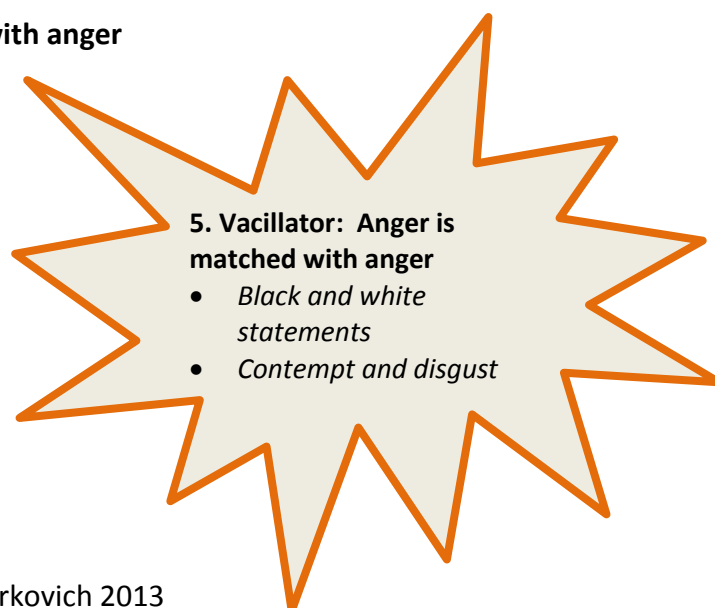
What's going on? This Core Pattern can take off and become destructive with either the Controller or Vacillator discharging the internal tension in a bout of anger. Once a blow up happens, the goal is not to match reactivity with reactivity. For the sake of the diagram we will start with the Vacillator.

1. The agitation and build-up of anxiety in the Vacillator (Step 1) eventually explodes on the spouse or kids. The attack may include accusations, assumptions of motives, judgments about intentions as well as a historical recounting of all other offenses that resemble the current transgression. Vacillators are not aware this is the way they release anxiety.
2. The Vacillator's emotional mood shifts are sudden, strong and powerful. Inwardly, they have gone to an all dark place that surprises and stresses 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.
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. The Controller views these ideas or crusades as a loss of control and will often oppose the Vacillator with equal intensity.
7. In this Core Pattern, anger is often met with anger and no one realizes other feelings underlie these angry outbursts. Tension is released but damage is done in the process.

Step 4: Controller fears losing control and matches Vacillator's anger with more anger:**What's going on?**

The moment the “attack” from the Vacillator occurs, the Controller is in instant fight mode and the battle is on! With control threatened, the Controller will increase his or her intensity to out-intimidate the Vacillator.

1. If verbal rage is insufficient to squash the protest of the Vacillator, the Controller may flee to escape or use physical violence to dominate. The Vacillator may or may not engage physically in return.
2. Since neither likes to be wrong nor back down, the possibility for violence is high.

Step 5: Anger is matched with anger

What's going on?

1. The Controller has met his or her match and the Vacillator's historical rage about abandonment fuels the interchange. Without intervention, anger is met with anger and the home is cast into a state of indescribable warfare where the children suffer the most. Some children will attempt to intervene which may earn them a backhand across the face...or worse.
2. The Controller gets further triggered and flooded and lashes out in anger and fights back with threats of their own.
3. This is the pinnacle of the emotional reactivity and the Vacillator may make extreme statements like, "It's over! I'm done! I'm getting a divorce!" The Vacillator may devalue the spouse to such an extreme level that all they feel is contempt and disgust for the spouse. This is likely to remind the Controller of painful childhood feelings where parents or siblings showed contempt and disgust for the Controller.
4. At this point, either one may leave in a huff and stonewall for days refusing to engage.

Step 6: Standoff with no resolution and then calm before the next storm**Step 6: Stand-off:**

- *No resolution*
- *Tension dies down*
- *Calm before the next storm*
- *Repeat of pattern*

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

1. After the battle, if nobody is in jail, hospitalized or dead, each retreats to a place of solace. The Controller may engage in substance abuse, leaving the house, falling asleep, numbing out in front of the TV or engaging in reckless behavior to disconnect from the agitation and violence.
2. After the explosive reactions subside, the exhausted Vacillator retreats into the old familiar inner world of preoccupation, ruminating about the event in which they see themselves as the victim. They assign negative motives to the Controller as a means of comforting themselves and justifying their actions
3. With time, tension dies down. However, the original issues are never addressed because the Vacillator and Controller have never learned how to repair a conflict.
4. Sadly, the pattern repeats itself and there is calm until the next storm.
5. Children are at the bottom end of the power chain and their fears, traumas and wounds go untreated. The Controller will lack empathy for the child, whereas the Vacillator,

with higher empathy, will turn attention to the distressed child, often without fully addressing the explosion that just occurred.

Growth Steps to Exit the Core Pattern:

Now that you understand the pattern, how do you get out of it? In this section, we give the Controller 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:

1. Look for what caused the build-up of tension and anxiety (described in Step 1) and identify what feelings preceded the anger, such as hurt, fear, shame and embarrassment. (Use the Soul Words List.)
 - 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?
2. 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?"
3. Your reactivity and flare-ups further alienate those you love, sabotaging the very closeness you desire.
4. 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."
5. Your Controller spouse won't "just get you" so be direct and ask for what you want instead of hoping "they will just know."
6. Be patient with your Controller 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. Patience does not mean you should tolerate abuse. Always call 911 when abuse takes place.

7. Be curious and explore your spouse's history to understand and to have compassion for the root of their Controller tendencies. This behavior was learned before they ever met you and isn't meant to personally hurt and irritate you. Controlling 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: Controller: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

1. In order to stop the Core Pattern quickly, learn to recognize the build-up of tension and anxiety in your Vacillator spouse and intervene and listen before the tension turns to anger. Say, "You seem stressed. Can you get the Soul Words List and tell me what you're feeling?" Engage proactively instead of matching reactivity with reactivity.
2. Use the Comfort Circle and the questions in the workbook to explore the childhood experiences of your Vacillator spouse that fuel their sensitivity to abandonment and help them grieve these hurtful memories.
3. Ask the Vacillator to make an "I feel and I need" statement or make a request versus complaining and criticizing.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 2: The Controller's tension builds toward anger.

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

For Controllers, these steps are very important in learning to manage your anger.

1. Increase self-awareness by noticing the build-up of tension that ultimately results in an outburst. Set your phone alarm and look at the Soul Words List several times a day and pick three feelings under any category except anger. Rate the intensity of your feelings from 1-10 (one low, ten high) and jot down any thoughts that go with these feelings. This will help you to better understand how your stress builds towards an eruption of anger.

2. Do the first chapters of the workbook in *How We Love* and contemplate when and where your anger really started during childhood or adolescence, and what events growing up are at the root of your anger.
3. Notice the absence of sadness and grief. Reflect on childhood memories with your spouse or friend and use the Soul Words List to describe the feelings a child would feel in each situation.
4. Ask your spouse to go around the Comfort Circle with you and share your childhood experiences that are at the root of your anger. In doing so, you can learn to experience with your spouse what you did not experience as a child. (Listening, validation and comfort).
5. Take responsibility for your anger and own that it is destructive. Quit blaming, excusing and minimizing the impact your anger has on others. If you had an angry parent, think about how you would feel if they owned the impact of their anger on you and make consistent efforts to change?
6. When you come home ask everyone in the family to share three feelings about their day. Use the Soul Words List and simplify it for younger children. You don't know what stresses your family members have faced during the day until you ask. Listen to the feelings and try to validate the feelings but don't try to fix the feelings. Let them be.
7. Make a list of the mean phrases you tend to use when you are angry. (If you don't know, ask your family). Circle each phrase that was said to you as a child. How do you think you felt as a child when you heard those words? Put a name by each phrase that you did say or would like to say to your parents, siblings, extended family or other specific people from your childhood years. (Don't say it, just be aware of who you are really angry at).
8. Ask your spouse to help you notice the verbal and non-verbal signs that indicate your stress is building and be open to their input. (Tight jaw, teeth clenching, flushing, increasing irritation.) When you spouse tells you they see these signs, STOP, go to a quiet place and write down all stressful events in your life and three feelings for each event. Share with you spouse.
9. I will resist my desire to turn to an addiction and numb the pain. I will call my sponsor and ask for help and I will ask my spouse to go around the Comfort Circle with me so I can experience with my spouse what I did not experience as a child. In this way, I can learn to turn to my spouse for relief rather than using addictive behaviors to get relief.

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

1. In order to stop the Core Pattern quickly, learn to recognize the build-up of tension and anxiety in your Controller spouse and intervene and listen before the tension turns to anger. Say, "You seem stressed. Can you get the Soul Words List and tell me what you're feeling?" Engage proactively instead of matching reactivity with reactivity.

2. Use the Comfort Circle and the questions in the workbook to explore the childhood experiences of your Controller spouse that fuel their need to dismiss any vulnerable feelings.
3. Ask the Controller to make an "I feel and I need" statement or make a request versus intimidating, complaining and criticizing.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 3. The Vacillator Vents.

This Core Pattern can begin with either the Controller or Vacillator discharging the internal tension in a bout of anger. The suggestions listed in Steps 1 and 2 are very important to stop the blow-ups. Once a blow-up happens, the goal is not to match reactivity with reactivity. For the sake of the diagram we will start with the Vacillator.

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

Stop! Take a time-out by saying, "I am too angry to continue. Let me calm down and then we can try a do-over."

1. Own your anger. Communication with harsh tones and mean, unkind words is not okay. 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 each family member, "How did my anger make you feel?"
2. Initiate a "do-over and try again using the Comfort Circle as a format. Remember to focus on feelings under the anger. In addition:
 - Formulate thoughts into a statement: "I feel _____ and I need _____."
 - Be aware of complaining and make a request rather than a complaint.

If the Controller begins the battle, the same steps can be followed.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 4: The Controller fears losing control and matches Vacillator's anger with more anger.

Step 4: Controller: Action steps to exit the Core Pattern:

If your spouse's anger is lighting your fuse, stop!! Take a time-out. Nothing good happens from this point onward. Repeat the time-out phrase: "I am too angry. I will ask for a do-over when I calm down." OR "I want to listen but I need to have a calm conversation. Let's take a time-out and then use the feeling words list to get beneath the anger."

1. If you need to, call a sponsor and ask them to talk you down. Review your childhood triggers that fuel your reactivity.
2. Remember you are not as little and helpless as you were as a child. You have resources and choices now that you did not have when you were growing up.
3. Don't use addictions to numb out. Use the Soul Words List and begin journaling to describe the hurt, vulnerable feelings underneath the rage.

When you attempt a do-over:

1. Instead of debating the facts and defending against the accusations, empathize and lean in to the Vacillator with compassion. "Wow! Something hurts. You must have gotten triggered; tell me about it. Tell me what's been going on in your thoughts and emotions. How long have you been thinking about all of this?"
2. Don't fix. Ask the Vacillator to share the memories that caused their childhood pain and try to comfort them.
3. Using the Comfort Circle, explain to the Vacillator what memories are triggered in you when they get reactive and angry. "When you rage at me, it keeps me from being close to you which is what you really crave and it reminds me of a time in my childhood when...."

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 5: The Vacillator makes black and white statements.

Step 5: Action steps for either the Vacillator or Controller to exit the Core Pattern:

1. Nothing good happens when intensity and reactivity dominate an interaction. Get the fire extinguisher and put out the fire by owning your anger. Try saying, "Let me calm down and then I will initiate a do-over."
2. De-escalate the fight. Ask for a 10-minute time-out, breathe deeply and seek to calm the reactivity. Ask for a "do-over" and attempt to readdress the feelings and ruminations in Step 1 and 2.
3. Establish appropriate boundaries with the opportunity to re-connect if boundaries are respected. If the other person is verbally abusive, I will walk away and tell them that I will return when they stop. If they are physically abusive, I will leave the house and call 911. (Either spouse should stop violence and take responsibility for their contribution.)
4. Get the Soul Words List and find the more vulnerable feeling underlying the anger. Determine what was causing the anxiety build-up (Step 1) in the circle. Ask for a do-over when you have some insight.
5. Call a friend or mentor and ask them to help you see YOUR part in the fight.
6. If there is drinking or drugs, this escalates my reactivity and the Core Pattern will dominate until these issues are addressed. Seek help for addictions.
7. Seek to repair with the children and apologize for outbursts and frightening behavior.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 6: The standoff with no resolution.

Step 6: Action steps for either the Vacillator or Controller to exit the Core Pattern:

Usually, the argument ends and each spouse retreats into their corner and fumes silently, pouts or uses addictive behavior to get rid of the painful feelings. As reactivity subsides, there is a period of calm but there is rarely any resolution and the whole cycle will repeat as tension builds once again.

1. Don't wait for your spouse to apologize. Beat them to it and ask for a "do-over" to go around the Comfort Circle. Use the listener guide for the Comfort Circle (freebie on the website) to identify root issues that drive this reactivity. What happened in childhood (before you ever met one another) that fuels the need for control, anger and fear of abandonment?
2. Understanding your spouse's history will help you have compassion for the underlying cause of their reactivity. Learn how your mate suffered in childhood and seek to comfort the wounds from difficult childhood experiences.
3. Remember grief is the best antidote to anger. Grief is the missing emotion for both the Vacillator and Controller so it is imperative that you each learn to grieve the difficult experiences you endured before you met one another.

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