

ATTACHMENT CORE PATTERN THERAPY™

VACILLATOR/PLEASER CORE PATTERN

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9. Pleaser:
Waits for
Vacillator to
Reengage

- Feels relief when they do
- Tries to please to prevent another outburst

8. Vacillator:
Anxiety Relieved
Through Anger

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

7. Pleaser: TRIGGERED

- Anxiety intensifies/ frantic
- Hidden dejection
- "I can never do it right"

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 stressful. Waiting for spouse to engage

- Vacillator: releases anxiety/tension through anger. Assumes spouse intends to hurt them

3. Pleaser: TRIGGERED

- Panic/freeze
- Lies to avoid conflict
- Minimizes or puts a positive spin on Vacillator's complaints
- Thinks Vacillator should be satisfied with their "niceness"

4. Vacillator: TRIGGERED

- Feels dismissed, misunderstood
- Wants "real" not "nice"
- Wants truth not lies
- Escalates, angry protest

6. Vacillator: TRIGGERED

- Feels abandoned, intensifies emotions
- Strong language, may threaten divorce
- Devalues spouse
- Over time, contempt and disgust for spouse

5. Pleaser: TRIGGERED

- Anxious about Vacillator's anger
- Scurries to do nice things to appease anger but avoids the problem

Attachment Core Pattern Therapy™ Interventions

Vacillator & Pleaser

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 PLEASER

- For most (or all) of my childhood I could have been described as the "good kid."
- I feel very anxious if someone is upset or annoyed with me so I am good at "keeping the peace."
- I seek connection and avoid rejection by anticipating and meeting others' needs.
- One of my parents was either fearful or critical and I tried hard to win approval and keep them happy.
- At times, I've had difficulty tolerating physical or emotional distance from my spouse.
- Conflict makes me uneasy and I prefer to deal with disagreement by giving in or making up for it and quickly moving on.
- I worry a lot.
- I have difficulty confronting or saying no and sometimes it makes me less than truthful.

- I generally don't feel angry, or if I do, I try to think about something else to get rid of it.
- I inwardly resent giving more than I get and feel like a doormat.
- I don't often ask for help and feel uncomfortable when others try to give me assistance.
- When I sense others are upset or distancing, I pursue and try harder to win them back.

The Initial Attraction:

The Pleaser has been trying to make others happy way before they meet their future mate. Initially, they find the Vacillator to be delighted and thrilled by their efforts to please. The Vacillator responds in ways that make the Pleaser feel successful. The Pleaser's anxiety is eased by all this approval. This feels great to the Pleaser because many times they didn't have this much success in their childhood making everyone happy.

The Vacillator has often grown up with a parent who is difficult to predict and please. Initially, the Pleaser is just about the nicest person the Vacillator has ever met. They keep waiting for the angry outburst, and when it doesn't come, they're hooked. They have found a consistently nice person and they are thrilled.

Overview of the Core Pattern

As the imprints collide, the Pleaser cannot keep up with the idealized expectation of the Vacillator. As they make mistakes and feel irritability from the Vacillator, their anxiety returns and they become concerned with avoiding conflict. Initially, they try harder to make it work, wanting to again feel the Vacillator's pleasure and praise. Vacillators confront and Pleasers are attempting to avoid confrontation which sets up a chase scene.

Vacillators are disillusioned when the initial passion begins to wane. They want their spouse to understand and want them, not just please them. The Pleaser's anxious scurrying around makes them feel placated, rather than known and valued. This isn't what they expected and over time the Pleaser's efforts become annoying. The Vacillator becomes more agitated and upset and they don't realize Pleasers don't know how to connect in a reciprocal way because they don't know how to receive. Since Pleasers did not learn to have soul words growing up and no one was asking about their heart, they cannot relate on this level.

Pleasers try to fix any negative emotions by doing nice things so their spouse is happy. Moving towards the difficult feelings of others (or their own) makes them anxious because they don't know what to do. Since the Vacillator doesn't understand these deeper dynamics, they feel more and more unloved, and more and more disillusioned and angry.

The Pleaser keeps trying. After all, they have been pleasing for their whole life. Over time, resentment begins to build but Pleasers rarely express anger openly so it may be expressed in passive ways. They feel they are walking on eggshells and while their efforts may make the

Vacillator happy for a while, it won't be peaceful for long. If the pattern continues long enough, the Pleaser's resentment may build to the point that they give up trying or leave their spouse. If the couple remains in this pattern for years, their marriage is often filled with bitterness and resentment.

When stuck in this Core Pattern each person feels:

The Vacillator:

- My spouse has hurt me deeply.
- I feel empty and lonely, without a passionate connection.
- I don't respect my spouse and it annoys me when they do things to please me that I don't even care about.
- Everybody thinks I'm married to the greatest person but they don't know how it is to live with this person.
- I have told my spouse what I need and still, it does not happen.
- Yes, I'm angry. Anyone would be angry in my situation.

The Pleaser:

- 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.
- I never know what to expect. It can be really good and suddenly it's very bad.
- I can't understand why little things make my spouse so reactive and mad.
- Other people appreciate me way more than my spouse.
- If I left the marriage, my spouse would see just how good they have it.

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

Individual growth steps for the 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 Pleaser (see How We Love Workbook)

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

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

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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/Pleaser 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 Pleaser 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:

Step 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?

Five things... Vacillator has a buildup of anxiety and tension:

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...

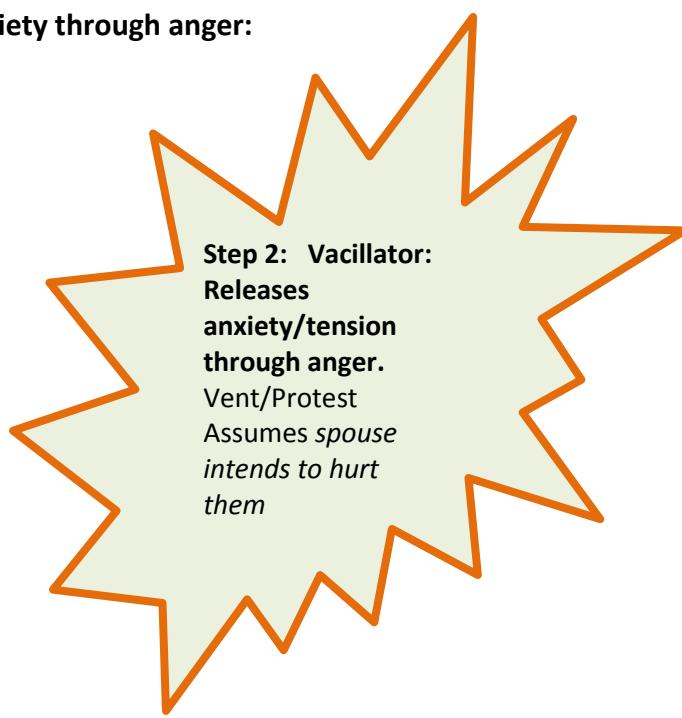
- Vacillators complain and blame when others make them feel "bad." They want their spouse to "mind read" and instinctively know how to make them feel good, wanted, understood and valued. They have an aversion to asking directly for what they want and need.
- Conversely, they are not open to any hint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

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

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



What's going on?

1. The agitation and buildup of anxiety and tension erupt, often without warning on the spouse or kids. 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.
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!" "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: The Pleaser is triggered and gets very anxious:

Step 3: Pleaser:

TRIGGERED

- *Panic/freeze*
- *Lies to avoid conflict*
- *Minimizes or puts a positive spin on Vacillator's complaints*
- *Thinks Vacillator should be satisfied with their "niceness"*

What's going on?

1. Pleasers 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. Therefore, 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 spouse is quiet, they assume "all's well." Though Pleasers are "anxiously attached and hyper-vigilant" and can sense shifts in the emotional states of others, they lack the skill and the courage to inquire about what is going on inside another person's mind.
3. Missing cues and naïvely ignoring the quiet before the storm, the Pleaser is stunned and shocked when the Vacillator discharges or lashes out at them.
4. The Pleaser's initial shock triggers fear, leaving them defensive and scared. They instantaneously freeze and may lose the capacity to think, speak, analyze or explain themselves.
5. The subsequent lack of response further intensifies the Vacillator who now feels ignored. Pleasers will tend to minimize the situation and calm the Vacillator by being nice.
6. With a clear intention to stay out of trouble, the Pleaser's temptation to lie is very high. Lying can become a routine behavior to stay out of trouble and escape the Vacillator's wrath. Pleasers lie because they are afraid.
7. The Pleaser is also hurt, saying to themselves, "I've done so many nice things today, why can't my spouse appreciate me?"
8. The Pleaser's instinctive emotional reflexes toward denial escalate the Vacillator's fury and reactivity.

Step 4: Vacillator escalates:



What's going on?

1. When the Vacillator feels invisible, dismissed, misunderstood or lied to, their reactivity will further escalate.

2. Over time, the Vacillator becomes tired of superficiality and wants a spouse who is "real" and who can deal with emotions as opposed to being "nice."

Step 5: Pleaser scurries to please:

**Step 5: Pleaser:
TRIGGERED**

- *Anxious about Vacillator's anger*
- *Scurries to do nice things to appease anger but avoids the problem*

What's going on?

1. The Pleaser gets further triggered and flooded and becomes highly anxious. Unlike the Avoider who lashes out in anger or leaves, the fear-based Pleaser will scurry around to distract and appease but will not directly address the problem.
2. The Pleaser will try harder to be nice and accommodating, hoping the problem will go away.

Step 6: Vacillator's anger increases. Use of black & white statements:

**Step 6: Vacillator:
TRIGGERED...angrier**

- *Feels abandoned, intensifies emotions*
- *Strong language, may threaten divorce*
- *Devalues spouse*
- *Over time, contempt, 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 become so extreme, they will rage at the spouse. On occasion, the Vacillator may become physically violent which could lead to hitting, slapping, throwing or breaking things.

Step7: Pleaser's panic/dejection:

Step 7: Pleaser: TRIGGERED

- *Anxiety intensifies/ frantic*
- *Hidden dejection*
- *"I can never do it right"*
- *Hopeless*

What's going on?

1. The Pleaser continues to freeze, panic sets in and they experience paralysis and despair, often berating themselves for causing the problem or lamenting the fact they can never seem to get it right.
2. Deeply hurt and scared, a complete shutdown occurs and the Pleaser will remain in a frozen state, watching and hoping for signs of warmth from the Vacillator.
3. At this point, the Pleaser may become very hopeless and dejected. Sometimes the Vacillator will notice the hopeless dejection of the Pleaser and feel they have "gone too far". At this point, the Vacillator may reengage and start being nicer. Over many years, the Pleaser may become more passive and depressed and care less and less.

Step 8: Vacillator's anxiety relieved through angry outburst and then the calm after the storm:

Step 8: Vacillator: anxiety relieved through anger

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

What's going on?

1. After the explosive reactions subside, the 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 Pleaser as a means of comforting themselves, believing their anger is justified.
3. The Vacillator may feel guilt and shame over their hurtful behavior but rarely disclose this to anyone. This private shame is a place of suffering for the Vacillator and they must learn to take this remorse to their spouse and own their behavior and apologize.
4. The Vacillator feels better after an angry outburst not realizing the reason . . . they have relieved a lot of anxiety. Others in the family feel worse but keep their reactions private to avoid another outburst.
5. There is rarely any apology for the anger or resolution. The Vacillator isn't aware that others feel worse.

Step 9: Pleaser waits for Vacillator to reengage:

Step 9: Pleaser waits for Vacillator to reengage

- *Feels relief when they do*
- *Tries to please to prevent another outburst*

What's going on?

1. The Pleaser 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. At this point in the Core Pattern, absolutely no resolution or repair takes place; the Pleaser never readdresses the problem or holds the Vacillator accountable for unacceptable behavior.

Growth Steps to Exit the Core Pattern:

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

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 1. Vacillator's tension builds toward anger.

Step 1: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

Pleasers, you can avoid this entire destructive circle by becoming aware of the stress response of your Vacillator spouse. What happens before an outburst? Do they get quiet? Grumpy? Critical? This is the time to intervene!

1. 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 Step1? 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 freezing in fear. Be real verses nice.
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 your spouse's history that shaped these harmful love styles. (See workbook in HWL for questions.)

Step 1: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. 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?
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 Pleaser 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 Pleaser 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.
7. Be curious and explore your spouse's history to understand and to have compassion for the root of their Pleaser 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.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 2: Vacillators’ anger erupts often without warning.

Step 2: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. Own your 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?”
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.

Step 2: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

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: Pleaser freezes, minimizes.

Step 3: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. Share with your spouse,” Your statement took me by surprise. I need to slow down the process so that I can hear you out. Let’s have a do-over.”

2. When the Vacillator is highly reactive, explain, “I will listen when we are both calm and can sit down and take turns listening using the Comfort Circle.”
3. If you ask for a time out re-engage, push through your fears and remember conflict is a part of life.
4. Ask your spouse after they are calm, “Can you share the anxieties that have been building up that caused this anger? What happened in Step 1 that triggered this anger?”
5. If your spouse remains angry, repeat the boundary statement in the previous step.

These words may be helpful when things calm down:

- “Wow! Something hurts!”
- “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?”
- “How long have you been thinking about all of this?”
- “I may not agree with all your conclusions and opinions, but you are valuable to me so I will listen.”

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 4: Vacillator feels dismissed and anger intensifies.

Step 4: Vacillator: 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. Go back and repeat the ideas in Step 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.”

Step 4: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

At this point it’s fair to say to your Vacillator spouse:

“I can’t listen well when you are this angry. I will listen when we can go around the Comfort Circle and you can share the feelings under the anger.” After they calm down, you may say:

1. “A person as angry as you are right now has a lot of hurt inside from the past. I’m not the source of your original hurts, yet I feel as though I receive all your anger. When

you rage at me, it keeps me from being close to you which is what we are working toward. I want to hold you and offer comfort for the hurts you received as a child."

2. Try to tie the present hurt to a past offense. "You are very angry at me right now. Did someone else hurt you in a similar manner? Perhaps I am getting some of the anger they deserve."
3. Ask for a do-over and try again when they calm down.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 5: Pleaser tries harder to be nice to alleviate anger.

Step 5: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

This is when you go into the "try harder" mode. Your pattern is to be nicer to placate the Vacillator's anger. Tell your spouse, "This is going to end badly if we don't stop now. Let's take a time out and have a do-over. I'll be back in 30 minutes." Don't fix or please. Be real and honest. Stop and draw a boundary any time the anger escalates, even in a do-over.

1. When it's calmer, ask the Vacillator to share their feelings from Step 1.
2. After it's calm, look your spouse in the eye, move physically closer to them and with as much empathy as possible ask, "What hurts inside?"

Step 5: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

You are overwhelming your Pleaser spouse. In reality, no one wants to sit and listen to an angry person. They are uncomfortable with anger for a good reason. Look into their childhood and figure it out. Take a time out and come back and ask for a do-over.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 6: Vacillator feels feelings are minimized and is angrier.

Step 6: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. If you don't stop the anger, this will end badly. Take a time out, leave the house and grieve, cry, pray, exercise or call a friend until my intensity subsides.
2. 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."
3. 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 your fault entirely. 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.
4. 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.

Step 6: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern

1. Draw a boundary and come back later for a do-over. Later, praise your spouse for any efforts they have made to grow and point back to a time when you communicated more effectively.
2. Be honest and tell your spouse how those words make you feel. Insist on being heard and do NOT take "No" for an answer. Refuse to engage until both of you can share feelings in the Comfort Circle. This is an important part of your growth.
3. Establish appropriate boundaries and ask for an apology when your spouse's anger is out of line. Remember respect is linked to boundaries. Initially this will make your spouse angrier, but eventually they will learn to respect your boundaries.
4. **Initiate reconnection if boundaries are respected. Tolerate the tension of waiting when they are not respected.**
5. Call a safe friend for support if you are having trouble waiting it out.

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 7: Pleaser is panicky, hopeless and dejected.

Step 7: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. I will learn to separate instead of hovering and taking my spouse's emotional temperature.
2. Tolerate the tension and don't appease for peace's sake. Learn to tolerate anger and rejection.
3. Initiate: "Let's have a 'do-over' after we take a break."
4. If your spouse is dangerous or physically abusive to anyone in the house, call 911. Make a report. Violence should NEVER be tolerated. If you leave the house, 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.
5. Ask your spouse to own their behavior and apologize before reengaging. "I want to talk this through and repair the damage but you will have to apologize first."

Exiting the Core Pattern Step 8: Vacillator feels better, Pleaser spouse and kids feel worse.

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 guilty 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: Pleaser 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 rudeness and minimizing the damage caused by your spouse's anger is so damaging to everyone in the home.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. Regularly confess your own shortcomings and share how your pattern of denial has been hurtful across the span of the relationship.

Step 9: Vacillator: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. I will go to anyone who heard the anger and hurtful words and attempt to “repair” by apologizing for my outbursts and frightening behavior. I will use the Comfort Circle as a guide to listen to other’s feelings about my anger. We repeat this so many times because it is vital to your growth.
2. As you understand your history, tell your spouse you have given them anger others in your past deserve.
3. Remember, anger is easier for you than sadness. Work on the unresolved grief from your childhood history.

Step 9: Pleaser: Action steps to exit the core pattern:

1. Resist the tendency to just wait for the Vacillator to “get over it”.
2. Initiate a Comfort Circle with a request that both of you take turns as the listener.

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