

AN EFT HANDOUT

PURSUER / WITHDRAWER CYCLE

The most common negative cycle in distressed couples. One partner turns up the volume, the other goes quiet, and each move triggers more of the other. Neither position is the problem; the cycle between them is.

THE TWO POSITIONS

Both positions are attachment behavior, just different strategies for managing the same fear.

THE PURSUER

ON THE SURFACE

Turns up the volume when disconnection shows up.
Asks direct questions. Pushes for the conversation.
Escalates when the partner goes quiet. Sometimes tips into criticism.

UNDERNEATH

Attachment protest. Underneath: "I need to know I still matter to you. Your silence feels like the beginning of losing you."

THE WITHDRAWER

ON THE SURFACE

Gets quiet. Leaves the room. Goes to their phone. Says "I don't know" a lot. Sometimes moves out of the conversation entirely by shutting down or falling asleep.

UNDERNEATH

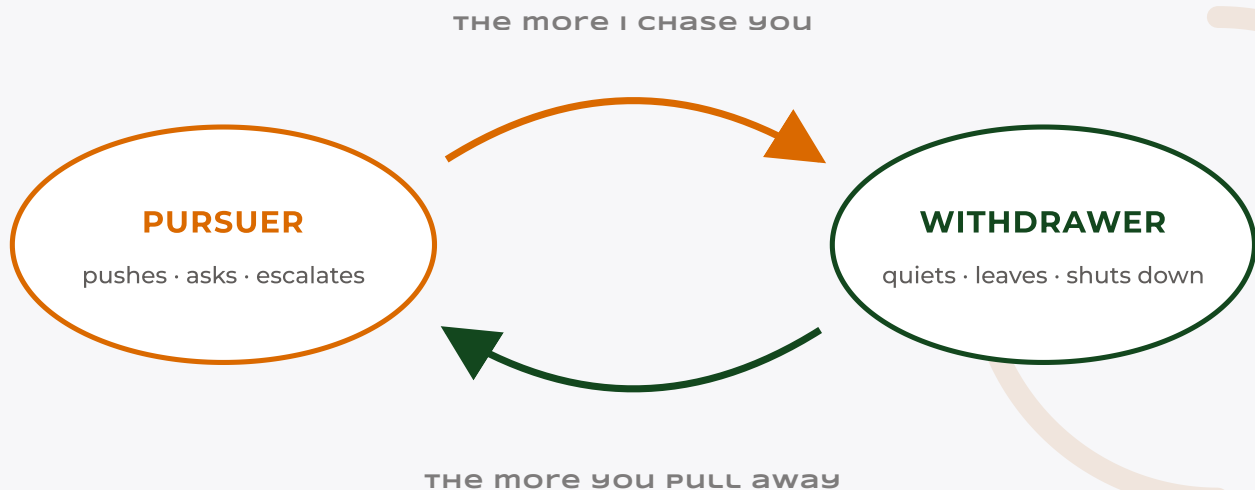
Attachment self-protection. Underneath: "I am failing you and there is no answer I can give that will fix this. If I say nothing, at least I stop making it worse."

SECONDARY AND PRIMARY EMOTION

EFT distinguishes the **secondary emotion** (what you show on the surface: anger, criticism, silence, sarcasm) from the **primary emotion** (what is running underneath: fear of losing you, feeling not important, feeling alone, feeling like a failure). The pursue-withdraw cycle runs on secondary emotion. Change happens when the primary emotion is said out loud, which is what Sue Johnson calls the softening event.

HOW THE CYCLE SPINS

Each move triggers the other. The harder one partner pushes, the further the other pulls away; the further they pull away, the harder the first one pushes. Neither of you is choosing it.



FIVE MOVES OUT OF THE CYCLE

Not sequential in a rigid way. Use whichever step you can access in the moment.

- 1 Name the cycle out loud (not each other)**

"We're in it again. The pursue-withdraw cycle is running. Neither of us is the enemy." Naming the cycle as a shared third thing lowers the temperature more than any specific content move.
- 2 Pursuer: soften the opening**

Slow the volume. Lead with the underneath ("I'm scared you're gone") instead of the surface ("why are you always like this?"). A softer opening lets the withdrawer stay in the room.
- 3 Withdrawer: stay a little longer than feels safe**

The instinct is to leave the conversation. Try staying 30 seconds longer than feels safe. Say something, even "I hear you and I am overwhelmed," and that is enough. Presence beats performance.
- 4 Pursuer: receive the small offer**

When the withdrawer stays present, notice it and thank them for it out loud. "Thank you for staying with me right now." The reinforcement matters. If small offers get met with "that's not enough," the withdrawer will stop offering.
- 5 Both: circle back later**

You do not have to solve the content in the middle of the cycle. Agree on a specific time to come back to it ("after dinner," "tomorrow morning"), and then actually come back.

Cycles are habits, and habits take reps. Calling the cycle out loud in the moment is the practice. You will not do it cleanly the first few times. What matters is that you both come to see the cycle as the shared problem, not each other.

EDUCATIONAL ONLY, NOT THERAPY.



APPLY IT THIS WEEK

Each partner journals separately first, then compares in a calm moment, not mid-cycle. Bring your answers to your next therapy session.

PROMPT 01

Which position do I usually take?

Pursuer, withdrawer, or does it flip depending on the topic? Notice if you take one position with your partner and a different one at work or with your parents.

PROMPT 02

Recall your last cycle in specifics

What was the trigger? What was the surface behavior each of you showed? Where in the sequence did it lock in?

PROMPT 03

Name the secondary emotion I showed

The visible one. Anger, criticism, distance, silence, sarcasm, checking my phone, sighing, leaving the room. Be specific about what your partner saw.

PROMPT 04

Name the primary emotion underneath

The one that was actually running. Common: scared of losing you, feeling not important, feeling like a failure, feeling alone in this, feeling too much for you. Which one was mine?

PROMPT 05

One small softening move for next time

Pursuer: soften the opening, slow the volume, lead with the fear underneath. **Withdrawer:** stay 30 seconds longer, say one thing before leaving, name what is overwhelming.

BRING TO YOUR NEXT THERAPY SESSION

The specific cycle you noticed, the secondary emotion you showed, and your best guess at the primary emotion underneath. Naming the primary emotion in session is often the first step toward the softening event that shifts the cycle for real. Adapted from Sue Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy. My Mental Climb is not affiliated with or endorsed by Dr. Sue Johnson or ICEEFT.