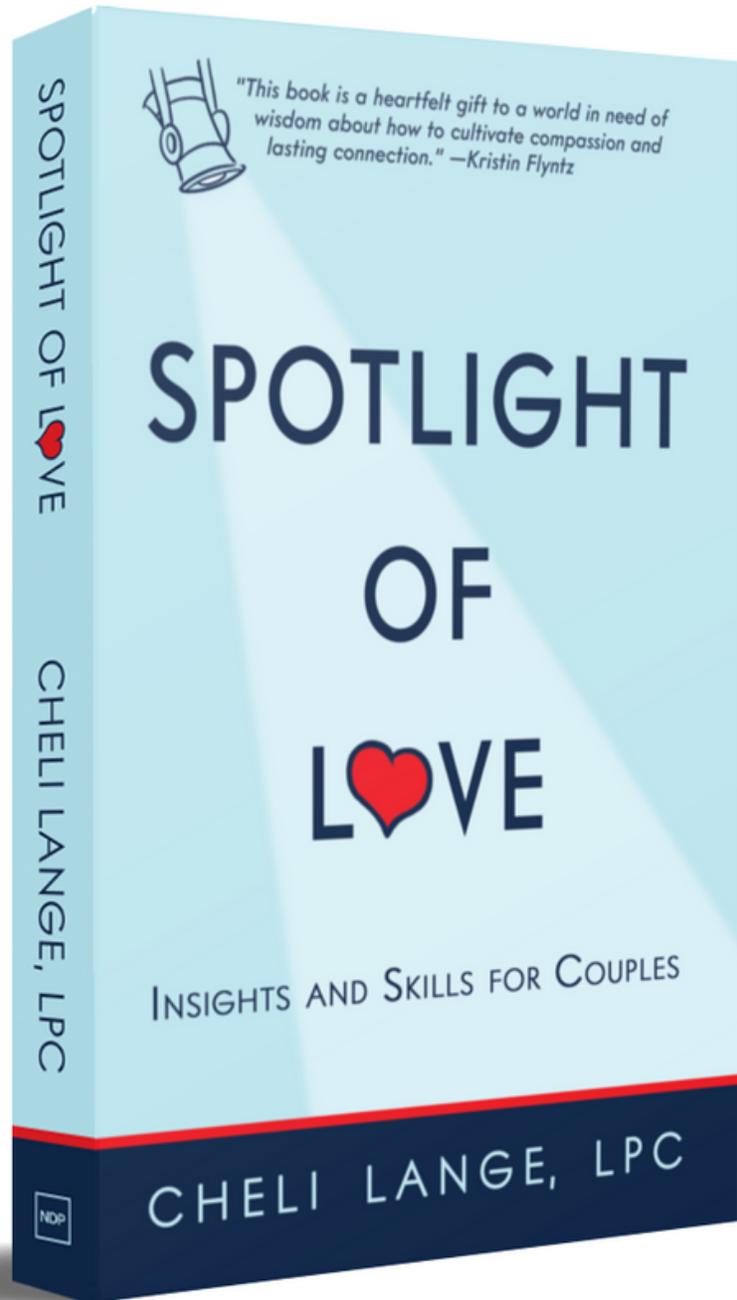


FREE EXCERPT FROM  
**CHAPTER 8**



## CHAPTER 8

# PURSUE-WITHDRAW

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Demanding, criticizing, silent judging, stubborn heel digging—we've all dished out and received at least some of these less-than-kind behaviors, but what happens when partners repeatedly direct them at each other?

\* \* \*

While we are complex and fully unique beings, we also operate in recognizable patterns that can help us understand ourselves. One of the most common negative patterns couples face is called **pursue-withdraw**. This pattern begins when one partner falls into the persistent role of **pursuing**, which often includes some form of demand, blame, or criticism, and one partner occupies the insistent role of **withdrawing**, which often includes some form of distancing or refusal to communicate.

Think of pursuit as turning up the heat or emotional intensity toward your partner and withdraw as turning the heat down, as if your relationship has a powerful dial that helps you regulate the intensity between you. The heat level rises and falls comfortably when you're securely connected. However, when

you have a particular hot-button topic, or your relationship is in distress, insecurities and resentments can surface and it's easy to become overheated or overcooled in the process.

## The Battle for Intensity

The couple pictured below is stuck in the pursue-withdraw cycle. They've fallen into this pattern so many times now that their roles are becoming entrenched with regard to this topic. Today, they are arguing about hugs.

Angry and sad about the amount of physical contact, the pursuing partner on the left reacts by turning the heat up and demanding attention. This is their way of saying, "I need you. Where are you?"



The withdrawing partner on the right feels worried by the uptick in emotion...

... and reacts by turning the heat down and dismissing the complaint, which is their way of saying, "When you're upset, I can't deal with the emotions I have inside."



The pursuing partner then concludes, "My feelings don't matter," which leads to more sadness and frustration. So they...

... double down on their original strategy even though it doesn't work: They turn the heat up even more, sure that if they can just get their partner's attention or explain themselves well enough, then they'll be reconnected, which would be soothing to their nervous system. All of this makes sense on an individual level.



However, in the withdrawing partner's nervous system (which is quite possibly flooded and numbing out due to overwhelm), what makes sense is to...

... shut all this emotional stuff down. The withdrawing partner then doubles down on their original strategy, which is also ineffective for the relationship: turning the heat *off*, this time by going quiet and turning away.



The partner who wanted more connection ends up getting even less than before they asked, something which increases their feelings of frustration and loneliness.

Both want a healthy and satisfying relationship. Sadly, the cycle leaves them feeling further apart.

While nuances exist, basic pursuing behavior often includes blaming, criticizing, raising a voice, overthinking, and insisting something be talked about, whereas withdrawing behavior often includes defending, going still and expressionless, avoiding the conversation through work or hobbies, trying to fix difficult feelings, or making a joke to divert attention.

What often can't be seen is that the pursuing partner is turning the heat up to restore connection and soothe their own anxiety, while the withdrawing partner is turning the heat down in an effort to protect the relationship and cope with their feelings, of which they are often unaware.

Of course, nobody is bad or wrong for feeling what they feel, *and* the impact of the behaviors on the other person can be immense. The withdrawing partner might describe themselves as being burned or cut by their partner's words, while the pursuing partner might say they feel starved or like they're bleeding out from the lack of connection.

Frustratingly, the more each partner tries to fix the problem according to what their sad, mad, scared, emotional brain is telling them is the best way, the worse the cycle gets and the more disconnected they become.

Each partner's behavior is understandable once we know what's happening for them on the inside. They are likely experiencing strong feelings and sensations or a lack thereof, plus thoughts and wonderings, such as:

- Why can't we just talk about it?
- Why can't this be easy?
- What happens if I upset you too many times?
- Do I matter to you?
- Am I ever enough?

- Am I too much?
- Can I count on you to be there for me?

Awareness of these underlying aspects can take some time to develop.

## I'm Sorry, the Cycle Can Get Even Worse

As miserable as the cycle of pursue-withdraw is in the moment, its long-term impact can cause even more pain. In *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find—and Keep—Love*, authors Amir Levine and Rachel S. F. Heller note that with every negative encounter between an anxious pursuing and avoidant withdrawing partner, the anxious pursuing partner loses more ground. This helps explain a variation on the pursue-withdraw cycle in which the pursuing partner burns out or gives up on their efforts for greater connection.

When the pursuing partner becomes resigned to the current level of closeness that exists, the distance between the two often grows.



While pursue-withdraw is widely considered to be one of the most destructive patterns a couple will face, according to researchers and couples therapists Dr. Lynn Fainsilber Katz and Dr. John Gottman, the pattern also impacts future generations, as children of parents who exhibit this pattern experience greater anxiety, depression, and withdrawal.

In a synthesis of seventy-four studies on the pursue-withdraw pattern, the beginning of pursue-withdraw was found to be a signal the relationship may be deteriorating, thus highlighting the importance of addressing the cycle as soon as you become aware (Schrodt et al. 2014). Additionally, the longer the cycle lives in your relationship, the more difficult it is to change—and understandably so.

It can be hard to believe or allow yourself to care that your partner is actually feeling distress and missing the connection with you if all you see is intense pursuit or aloof retreat.

Both partners are speaking and acting from needs that are real and important, *and* they are often repeating strategies that simply don't work.

## **Behaviors or Entrenched Roles?**

Before we explore possibilities for transforming these cycles or safeguarding your relationship from them, note that the behaviors of pursuing and withdrawing are different from the pursue-withdraw dynamic as entrenched roles in your relationship. We all resort to unhelpful pursuing or withdrawing. The danger begins when partners consistently dig in their heels with repeated behaviors due to repeated reactions, doing so without addressing underlying feelings and needs and without repairing the hurts that inevitably come as a result.

In a secure and balanced relationship, you notice these not-so-helpful behaviors in yourselves and point them out to each other. You say, “Ouch,” figure out what’s really going

on, and repair things between you. In these instances, the moments of conflict and disconnection might be uncomfortable and frustrating, *and* you get through them without any lasting harm to your relationship. In fact, you get through them with greater confidence that you'll be there for each other the next time.

Pursue-withdraw as an entrenched cycle is different. When the behaviors described above turn into primary roles you play whenever you discuss that topic, then the cycle itself pits you against each other. You want so much to be on the same team and instead find yourselves feeling like you're on opposite sides. Rather than being a source of soothing, you become threats to the scared parts of each other. When that happens, your nervous systems can get overwhelmed. When you're caught in your cycle, time can feel short, options limited, and thinking becomes black or white rather than flexible. Your physiology changes as a result of the stress. On every level, you can lose your sense of togetherness when you need it most.

## The Healing Power of Adult Relationships

Regardless of where you are on continuums of secure-insecure attachment and pursue-withdraw behavior and roles, we know adult romantic relationships have great influence over how we relate to ourselves and others. According to Levine and Heller:

“[Adult romantic relationships] are so powerful that they [can] actually revise our most basic beliefs and attitudes toward connectedness.”

Primary adult relationships throughout our lives can bring out different aspects of our overall attachment styles, meaning parts of us are anxious and parts are avoidant. Parts of us pursue, and parts withdraw. When relationships are secure and balanced, these behaviors need not become entrenched roles.

The following is a story of contrasting experiences with pursuing, withdrawing, and security.

A woman I spoke with revealed that she had secretly thought of herself as a nagging wife because she pursued her husband in their marriage. She was usually the one to ask and often insist on more time and closeness. She spent time thinking about their relationship, coming up with new ideas to draw him closer, and she admits with regret that she often accused him of not caring about her.

Years following her divorce, she began to understand the avoidant part of herself when she dated someone who was more emotionally pursuing than she was. While dating one of these men, for example, she felt a stunned confusion come over her when he anxiously pursued her for more time together. She thought things were great between them, so these requests surprised her and felt like pressure. In time, she noticed she avoided the conversation whenever he anxiously asked about her availability. She was also hesitant to share other concerns she had. As the withdrawing partner in this relationship, she had now been on both sides of the pursue-withdraw cycle.

Owning her avoidant moves with her dating partner as well as her pursuing moves with her former husband gave her perspective and empathy. Years

later, she found someone with whom she now enjoys a secure connection, one where she says they each have anxious moments and avoidant moments. In those times, though, they share their insecurities and reassure each other, and she's amazed that their momentary frustrations are just that.

## **Preventing or Transforming the Monstrous Cycle**

As we explored previously, levels of pursuit and withdraw range from the occasional behavior to an entrenched cycle. If you're reading this book to proactively create a healthy foundation for your new relationship, the Moves offer direction to help you establish and maintain a balance of giving and receiving.

If you've been in a negative cycle of pursue-withdraw for some time, the Spotlight is a helpful tool to assess where you're stuck and coach you to new skills for partnership. You might find the process brings more joy and less suffering as you move toward balance and clarity. If this isn't the case and you're still experiencing the cycle as a monster pitting you against each other, it's important to find a professional who works with these cycles. Once they are entrenched, making changes can be very difficult without professional help.

For that help, I recommend EFT for couples, augmented with trauma therapies such as EMDR if either or both of you are experiencing reactivity that isn't improving markedly through the course of your therapy. By reactivity, I mean the aspects mentioned above (time can feel short; options limited; and thinking becomes black and white rather than flexible), as well as an awareness that you're anxiously turning up

the heat—or shutting it down. If these types of reactions are becoming less frequent, less intense, and reducing in duration, this is a positive sign. I recommend keeping a journal so you can accurately assess your progress toward getting what you want for yourself.

Willing partners are curious to become more aware of their own inner world and to learn how their behavior impacts their partner's inner world. They care greatly about changing their own reactive patterns.

The Spotlight Moves help you regulate the heat on your relational burners.

