COUPLES PSYCHOEDUCATION · CONFLICT CYCLES

The Pursuer–Withdrawer Cycle

Why a pause asks more of one partner than the other — and why coming back is what actually builds the trust.

THE SHAPE OF THE CYCLE

Under stress, most couples fall into complementary roles. One partner moves *toward* to repair the connection; the other moves *away* to survive the intensity. Neither role is the problem. The problem is that each move makes the other move more likely, and the loop tightens.

PURSUER
Presses for contact, resolution, an answer now
→
WITHDRAWER
Feels flooded, goes quiet, steps back to protect
→
PURSUER
Reads distance as danger, presses harder
→
WITHDRAWER
Retreats further — the loop repeats

WHAT A PAUSE COSTS EACH OF YOU

For the Withdrawer

The pause ***grants*** *the need.*

- Relief arrives immediately — the intensity stops.
- The nervous system gets the space it was asking for.
- Nothing further is required to feel better.
- *Risk:* relief can quietly become avoidance.

For the Pursuer

The pause ***defers*** *the need.*

- The bid for connection stays open and unanswered.
- Distress rises rather than falls during the break.
- Waiting is an act of trust, extended on credit.
- *Risk:* unrepaid credit hardens into “I don’t matter.”

20
MINUTES MINIMUM

The pause is still the right call. Gottman’s lab found that once heart rate passes roughly **100 bpm**, the brain regions handling empathy, listening, and perspective-taking go partly offline. Continuing to talk in that state does damage. Recovery takes about twenty minutes — and only if the time is spent self-soothing rather than rehearsing the argument.

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

1

Name the return

Don’t just leave. Say when you’ll be back: “I need thirty minutes. Let’s pick this up at eight.”

2

Soothe, don’t stew

Walk, breathe, do something absorbing. Building your case keeps arousal high and wastes the break.

3

Withdrawer returns first

Whoever called the pause reopens it. This single act is what converts a retreat into a promise kept.

4

Finish the conversation

Aim for understanding, not winning. The pursuer’s deferred need is now the first order of business.

> *“The pause is only half the move. The circle closes when you come back — and it is the consistent revisiting, not any single conversation, that builds the trust.”*
>
> Each kept return teaches the pursuer that stepping away is not leaving, and teaches the withdrawer that returning is survivable. Over repetitions the pursuer stops chasing, because waiting has become safe — and the withdrawer stops fleeing, because the conversation has become finite.

NOTE A pause with no return is not regulation — it is the destructive version of this pattern that the research measures. Across 74 studies (N = 14,255), demand–withdraw predicted lower relationship satisfaction, higher anxiety and depression, and increased likelihood of dissolution. What separates the healthy pause from the harmful one is simply whether the circle gets closed.

Ed Croteau, LMFT · License #162500
Santa Cruz Therapy and Marriage Counseling, Inc.
Santa Cruz & Felton, California · edcroteau.com

Sources: Christensen & Heavey (1990), *J. Personality & Social Psychology* 59, 73–81 — demand/withdraw pattern. Schrodt, Witt & Shimkowski (2014), *Communication Monographs* 81(1), 28–58 — meta-analysis, 74 studies, N = 14,255. Gottman & Gottman, *The Antidote to Flooding* (2017) and Gottman Institute, “Manage Conflict Part 4” — DPA threshold ≈100 bpm, 20-minute minimum break. Johnson, *Emotionally Focused Therapy* — pursue/withdraw as attachment protest and protection.