

Are you in a Fear Cycle with Your Partner?

Objective

To identify how you feel and respond when you are in a fear cycle.

What to Know

In romantic relationships, the fear cycle refers to when one or both of you are engaging in unkind or hurtful behaviors during conflict. You might both feel bad because of the things that are said and done. The worse you feel, the more you react. And it goes around and around.

There are three types of fear cycles:

- 1. The fight/flight cycle.** One of you moves toward (fight) while the other moves away (flight). The more you move toward your partner, the more they move away. Or the more you move away, the more they move toward you. You probably both feel frustrated.
- 2. The fight cycle.** Disagreements escalate quickly, and there is a danger of saying or doing things that are quite hurtful and damaging to the relationship.
- 3. The flight cycle.** Disagreements end quickly because you both move away from each other. Disengagement can lead to growing apart, neglect, and loneliness.

Most couples experience one or all of the fear cycles at some point, but the goal is to stay out of fear cycles as much as possible. It's a good idea to become acquainted with your fear cycle so you can see it coming, recognize when you're in it, and find your way out of it. When you spend less time in a fear cycle, you can spend more time building your relationship in healthy ways.

What to Do

Describe a recent conflict, argument, or negative situation with your partner—something that really “pushed your buttons.”

1. How did you feel in response to this situation? Check all that apply:

- | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure | <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed | <input type="checkbox"/> Disgusted | <input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apathetic | <input type="checkbox"/> Worn out | <input type="checkbox"/> Resentful | <input type="checkbox"/> Frightened |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Puzzled | <input type="checkbox"/> Torn up | <input type="checkbox"/> Bitter | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Upset | <input type="checkbox"/> Shamed | <input type="checkbox"/> Fed up | <input type="checkbox"/> Horrified |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sullen | <input type="checkbox"/> Uncomfortable | <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated | <input type="checkbox"/> Disturbed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad | <input type="checkbox"/> Confused | <input type="checkbox"/> Miserable | <input type="checkbox"/> Furious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hurt | <input type="checkbox"/> Worried | <input type="checkbox"/> Guilty | |

___ Other: _____

___ Other: _____

2. How did this situation make you feel about yourself? Circle all that apply.

As a result of the situation, I felt:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Worthless/devalued | I'm useless and I feel like I have no value to my partner. |
| Rejected | My partner doesn't want, desire, or need me. I am unnecessary in this relationship. |
| Abandoned | I will be alone because my partner will ultimately leave me. My partner isn't committed to me. |
| Disconnected | We will separate or be emotionally disconnected. |
| Like a failure | I'm not a good partner. I don't live up to expectations. I always fall short. |
| Helpless/powerless | I can't do anything to change the situation and/or my partner. I don't possess the resources, capacity, or ability to get what I want. My partner controls me. |
| Defective | Something is wrong with me. I'm the problem. |
| Inadequate | I'm incapable and incompetent. |
| Inferior | Everyone is better than me. I'm less important or valuable than others. |
| Invalidated | Who I am, what I think, what I do, or how I feel isn't valued. |
| Unloved | My partner doesn't love me anymore. My relationship lacks admiration, respect, or affection. It seems like we are just roommates. |
| Dissatisfied | I'll never be pleased with my relationship. There is no joy or satisfaction. |
| Ignored | My partner doesn't pay attention to me. I feel neglected. |
| Humiliated | This relationship is destructive to my self-respect or dignity. |
| Cheated | My partner takes advantage of me. I don't get what I want. |
| Don't measure up | I'm not good enough for my partner. |
| Unaccepted | My partner isn't pleased with me and doesn't approve of me. |
| Judged | I'm always unfairly judged. My partner has negative opinions of me. I'm always being evaluated. |
| Unimportant | I'm not important to my partner. I feel irrelevant and insignificant. |
| Other | _____ |
| Other | _____ |

3. What do you do when you feel _____? (*insert one of the feelings from above*)

Honestly assess how you typically react or cope. Circle all that apply.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Withdrawal | I avoid others or isolate myself. I sulk or use the silent treatment. |
| Escalation | My emotions spiral out of control. I tend to raise my voice or fly into a rage. |
| "Earn-it" mode | I try to do more to earn my partner's love and attention. |
| Negative beliefs | I believe things are far worse than they are. |
| Blaming | I usually place responsibility on my partner. |
| Exaggeration | I tend to overstate or enlarge my words beyond the truth. |

Tantrums	I have fits of anger.
Denial	I don't easily admit the truth or reality.
Invalidation	I devalue my partner and I don't appreciate or respect them.
Defensiveness	Instead of listening, I defend myself by trying to provide explanations.
Clinginess	I develop a strong dependence on my partner.
Passive-aggression	I display negative emotions, resentment, and aggression in an unassertive and passive manner, procrastination, or stubbornness.
Caretaking	I become responsible for others by giving physical or emotional care and support to the point I'm doing everything.
Acting out	I engage in drug or alcohol use, extramarital affairs, excessive spending, or overeating.
Fix-it mode	I focus on what's needed to solve the problem.
Complain/criticize	I make accusations and present a list of faults about my partner.
Striking out	I become verbally or physically aggressive, possibly abusive.
Manipulation	I get my partner to do what I want. I control them for my own advantage.
Anger or rage	I display strong feelings of displeasure or violent and uncontrolled emotions.
Catastrophize	I use dramatic, exaggerated expressions to depict the relationship is in danger.
Shut down	I numb out emotionally or have no regard for other's needs or troubles.
Humor	I use humor to avoid dealing with the issue.
Sarcasm	I use hurtful words, inappropriate humor, belittling comments, or cutting remarks.
Minimization	My partner overreacts, so I underestimate or downplay the issue.
Rationalization	I attempt to make my actions seem reasonable.
Indifference	I tend to become cold and show little concern.
Abdication	I give away responsibilities.
Self-abandonment	I desert or neglect myself.
Other	_____

Other _____

Of the three types of fear cycles, which is most common for your and your partner? _____

On the next page, fill in your fear cycle, referring to the above questions.

Step 1: My Core Fear Buttons

Insert the top 3 feelings from #2, (*using list, above*)



Step 2: My Reactions

Write down your most common coping strategies from #3

Step 3: My Partner's Fear Buttons

(Try to guess how your partner feels, from #2)

Step 4: My Partner's Reactions

Write down your partner's most common coping strategies from #3

Notes: _____

So, what can you do to break the fear cycle? These steps can help.

- Take control of and responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- Choose how you react when your partner pushes your buttons.
- Avoid giving anyone the power to manipulate your feelings.
- Don't focus on what your partner has done. The only person you can change is yourself.
- Don't expect others to make you happy.
- Approach your relationship with realistic expectations.
- You can't force your partner to meet your needs, but when you express your needs, your partner can choose to step up.
- Taking personal responsibility means apologizing and asking for forgiveness. Choose to forgive your partner.

Reflections on This Exercise

Was this exercise helpful in allowing you to recognize your fear cycle, and how you and your typically feel during conflict? Why or why not?

Were you able to easily identify how you and your partner cope or react? Why or why not?

What can you do to break the fear cycle? Explain.

What did you find most challenging about this activity?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
