

Breaking the Pursue-Withdraw Cycle

The pursue-withdraw cycle is not an argument. It is a loop that arguments happen inside, and it has a property that makes it uniquely frustrating: each person's move makes perfect sense as a response to the other's, which means both of you are right and it still gets worse.

Who this is for: One of you chases the conversation and one of you needs it to stop, and you have both explained this to each other many times without anything changing.

The five steps

1. Map one argument, move by move

Six to ten moves, alternating, no interpretation.

The argument, with a date, in one line:

Moves 1–4, alternating, actions and words only:

Moves 5–8:

Where did it stop being about the original subject?

2. Find the entry point

The move where the disagreement became the cycle.

Which move number is the entry point, in my account?

Which one is it in theirs? (Compare.)

What was the last thing said before it that was still about the actual subject?

What did I believe about them at that exact moment?

3. What each move is asking for

Underneath the behaviour, both requests are ordinary.

My move, and what it was really asking for:

Their move, and my best honest guess at what it was asking for:

Ask them. What did they say?

Could either request have been granted, if it had been said in those words?

4. One change each, at the entry point

Small, specific, and at the right moment.

My one change, in a single sentence, with the exact words:

Their one change, in their words:

What will make mine hard in the moment?

The signal either of us can use to say "this is the entry point, right now":

5. Run it and log it

Three rounds is enough to know whether it moves.

Round 1 — entry point caught? Loop length? Time to repair?

Round 2 — same three:

Round 3 — same three:

What to adjust, and which of the two changes is doing more work?

This worksheet is free to print, photocopy and share, including with clients. It is self-reflection material, not a diagnosis, an assessment or a substitute for professional support. If a relationship involves fear, control or coercion, or if working through this raises more than feels manageable, please speak to a doctor, a therapist or a domestic abuse service.