

I could not seem to be able to help myself. I was chasing an ex-girlfriend with a fervour and intensity that scared me to the core of my being. Instead of being able to walk away from a relationship that had soured, I unwittingly became emasculated -a slave to my out of control feelings and desires. I was overwhelmed by anger, hurt, grief, shame and longing. The constant state of panic I found myself in outweighed any semblance of rationality, level-headedness or good judgment. I had become what I feared most about myself - a sniveling, cowardly poor representation of a man. All this because a relationship ended and the women I loved rejected me. Though to be fair that is only a small part of the story. The ending triggered some deeply repressed feelings and thoughts which stemmed all the way back to childhood.

Fast forward to today and I handle rejection and abandonment well even if I do say so myself. The ending of a relationship is closer to water of a ducks back than any anxiety provoking experience. When my last relationship ended I was a little sad and there was a hint of disappointment - hardly a full-blown anxiety attack. In fact, I was back working the next day without any negative thoughts or emotions and was attacking life with as much vigour and energy as I could muster. The two experiences were like chalk and cheese even though I was rejected and abandoned in both.

A lot of water has passed underneath the bridge since those anxiety filled days. I had to turn inward and look at myself and what was occurring in my experience with a new set of eyes. I also had to follow through and do the experiential work. Developing some insight was one part of the equation, acting and implementing new ways of being in the world was an important other part. Though I did not have the language for it at the time nor was I conceptualizing it as such, but effectively I was training myself to act in ways which were more beneficial to myself.

## Enter Neurobiology

The field of neurobiology reveals that all of us are wired to repeat conditions from our past. At a synaptic level our neural networks look for the stimulation of familiar patterns. This holds true even when we engage in destructive and self-defeating habits. Effectively we are primed to repeat our past even if the past is filled with adverse childhood experiences.

The counterpoint to the last paragraph is that our brains are malleable even into old age. The malleability of our brains is often referred to as neuroplasticity. What it teaches us

about ourselves is that given the right conditions we can adapt into more beneficial ways of being. We can form new synaptic connections and replace old patterns with new ones which work to our benefit.

This by no means is an overnight process or a quick fix. It requires a high degree of persistence, a willingness to let go of the old and a readiness to embrace the new. The beauty is if we are lacking in these areas we can learn to create them.

As a psychotherapist, I see many intimate relationships which are floundering and have become stuck in negative patterns of relating. Like I was with my first example, these people are being pulled by unconscious forces - often feeling overwhelmed and out of control of their lives. Romantic relationships can often bring the best of us out, but at times they can also bring out our worst features and deepest fears.

For me it was a deep fear of abandonment, for my ex-girlfriend it was a fear of enmeshment. It is a very common pattern found in dysfunctional relationships. In my experience, if both people are willing to work on the relationship, then much can be achieved. Even relationships which seem to be beyond repair can turn things around if both people are willing participants in the healing process. The relatively new fields of interpersonal neurobiology and neuroscience are fields which should give people genuine hope.

When we combine the neuroscience of our beings with other factors which affect our relationships, we can come to a new understanding of how we function in relationships. One of the most common factors which affect a large number of relationships is the chase and the room for intimacy in our romantic relationships.

## Definition of Intimacy

Popularized definitions of intimacy often include notions of sexual encounters or close relationships, but to me they often miss the mark of what true intimacy is. The following definition is something I have used for many years, particularly when giving talks on the subject.

Intimacy is our ability to be in contact with our inner worlds and then convey that contact to another person or group of persons. For example, if I was feeling fragile, I might convey that sentiment to someone else. That would be an instance of intimacy. Or conversely if I am feeling great about life and convey that to someone that also would be an indication of intimacy.

Under this definition of intimacy there are two parts. The first is our ability to know what is going on internally for us. The second is to then convey that information to another person. It could also be conveyed to a group of people. Sex can lead to intimacy because it can help foster a connection with another person. It is the quality of the connection which provides a field for intimacy to flourish.

Intimacy is an important facet of romantic relationships. A good healthy relationship will allow intimacy to flourish while respecting each other boundaries. Some relationships will maintain themselves without intimacy. This is a critical point to remember and is worth exploring.

## Three Types of Relationships

It is sometimes said that there are only three types of relationships. The first of these is the distancer - distancer relationship, the next is a pursuer - pursuer relationship and the third and by far the most common is the distancer - pursuer relationship.

The distancer - distancer relationship is characterized by both people living separate lives while under the same roof. They may be sleeping in different beds, have their own set of social circles and have separate interests. Their mode of interacting is usually minimal and is largely kept at a superficial level. It is not unheard of for this type of relationship to go without sex for years. Counter intuitively, this type of relationship often lasts the distance and only ends when one or the other dies. They rarely make their way into therapy or seeing a priest or doctor for relationship advice. It typically takes a significant trauma which really shakes both people to the core to have their gaze turn inwards into the working of their relationship. A death of a child, facing poverty, a serious illness is among the events which could trigger the couple into looking for help.

Think of a couple who do everything together. They go shopping together, they not only have the same hobbies and interests but also do them together. The couple has the same friends. It is as if they are joined at the hip which psychologically is not far off the mark. The couple is a pursuer - pursuer couple. In this sort of coupling, the relationship is stuck in very early phase of development. It is important to heed that it is not an extended honeymoon period. It is that both people are caught in a very rigid form of relationship where each other's boundaries are often trampled upon. The people involved can act out in passive aggressive mannerisms. Like the distancer - distancer couple they rarely find their way into therapy and often last for extended periods of time - usually till one or the other dies.

As we have seen intimacy is not necessary for the longevity of a relationship. But if we want a healthy relationship which extends us and helps to make us better people then intimacy is vital.

## The Distancer Pursuer Cycle

Nearly all relationships are affected by a dance of connection and separation. It is a primal dance characterized by one person doing the chasing their partner in an area of life. The tendency for the other person involved in the relationship is to distance themselves. An example which most people are familiar with is the on again - off again couple. This couple is caught in an extreme variant of the distance pursuit cycle. Which brings us to the third type of relationship.

In this cycle one partner will predominately play the role of the distancer and the other plays the role of pursuit. Someone who pursues is typically the person who wants to talk things out, often immediately. They are the person which outwardly appears to want to encourage intimacy in the relationship through the resolution of some conflict. The distancer on the other hand is often the person, who says can we talk about this some other time, or might say "get off my back" or go out for a long walk or visit friends or give the silent treatment in the midst and heat of a conflict. The more that person distances, the more the other person will pursue.

I have seen some articles on distancing and pursuing which espouse that the pursuer is seeking connection and intimacy. Unfortunately, that type of thinking perpetuates a myth. While the pursuer may declare they seek connection and intimacy, their actions tell a different story. Think of it as so; the pursuer at an unconscious level knows that their behaviour pushes the other person away. The more they push, the more the other person backs away. This pushing away is detrimental to creating a relationship where intimacy can flourish.

Sometimes I will ask couples to roleplay a typical argument situation. In this roleplay scenario, each person plays their partner in an argument. Almost without exception, the people involved know how the other person will behave in an argument. In many instances, they can elucidate what the other person will say word for word.

The reverse also applies. The distancer knows that the more they distance the harder they will be chased. Each person will contribute to the dynamic in their own unique way.

It is also good to note that healthy relationships will have aspects of distancing and pursuing

in them. For example, a distancer may enjoy time alone in order to meditate. This person appreciates the inner aspects of being and might be found contemplating life. A pursuer may enjoy the ability to share some aspect of themselves with new friends. This social orientation can greatly enhance the quality of life. The distance and pursuit cycle is not necessarily an indication of relationship dysfunction.

The cycle becomes destructive when it becomes ingrained and is constantly agitated by stressors. It begins to have a life of its own where the people involved often cannot recognize themselves. To them there does not seem to be a way to alleviate the cycle nor diminish their fears. This is largely because when acute anxiety tampers with the cycle, old childhood wounds are reopened.

## The Fear of Abandonment

One of the core issues with the pursuer is a fear of abandonment. As a child they may experience loss or rejection. They might have the unfortunate experience of not having their physical or emotional or psychological needs met. This causes the child to be distrusting of the world and feeling insecure. Sometimes, the fear of abandonment has much more subtle origins than we give it credit for.

A child may perceive rejection via criticism, or a parent not having much energy for the child. A parent may be suffering from depression or an illness and as such cannot give the child the nurturance it needs.

The child may begin to feel overwhelmed and experiences a loss of control. It is this combination which drives much of the fear of abandonment. Issues revolving around abandonment form when one partner becomes overly dependent upon the other. A person may make 20 calls in a day to their lover under the guise of caring, but unconsciously what is driving the behaviour is a fear of abandonment.

The persons perception is often one of dis-trust. They might make repeated statements like "You don't care about us" or "You never really loved me". The underlying tone is one of mistrust about the other persons feelings and thoughts on the relationship.

Abandonment at its core is about feeling disconnected to someone. Often the signs and symptoms of abandonment wont surface until the relationship begins to have difficulties. When it does surface the anxiety levels of a person embark on an upward spiral. A general rule of thumb is that the more disconnection in a relationship, the higher the anxiety level. The person then has the experience of being overwhelmed and suffers a perceived lack of

control.

Most of the pursuers attempts at resolving their anxiety involve trying to resolve a perceived rejection. It is common for pursuers to criticize the other person to get them to conform to their expectations of the relationship. The chase in the relationship is an attempt to alleviate their own anxiety and get back in control of their lives. The tell-tale sign is the extreme nature of the set of behaviours.

Like most defence systems it is the rigidity of the persons behaviours which cause the difficulty. For instance, some constructive criticism if well thought out and delivered without putting the other person down may help the relationship develop. But when criticism becomes habitual and almost always is demeaning of a person then it diminishes the possibility of a good healthy relationship.

It is important to remember that a child perceives things differently to how an adulthood would. A child may register an experience as traumatic, but as an adult it does not seem to be a big deal. Consider the example of a parent who is ill for an extended period. As an adult we can comprehend and reconcile that the parent may not have been available in the manner we would have liked. But as a child it could easily be lodged in memory as a rejection of themselves.

## The Fear of Enmeshment

Enmeshment as a concept is not as popularized as abandonment but it has similar mechanics in the form of loss of control and feeling overwhelmed. Enmeshment differs from abandonment in important ways. Typically, enmeshment results when a child's boundaries are encroached. The child is raised in an environment where the boundaries are unclear and often are muddled. This can cause a person to develop an unconscious fear of closeness. A call for closeness may be perceived as a threat to their boundaries and can create a sense of being pressured into something they may not be ready for.

Enmeshment and for that matter abandonment often result from subtle behaviours. Consider the example of a family who expect their child to become a medical doctor. Rigid set of rules, some implicit and others explicit put pressure onto the child to conform to their parent's expectations. The child might want to become a chef and their cooking talent suggests it could be a good fit. The clash is between the child's desires and the family's expectations. In some cases, the parent's expectations win out. The pressure from the parents can take their form subtle visual cues and the way their body language conveys one direction over the other. It does not necessarily have to be verbalized.

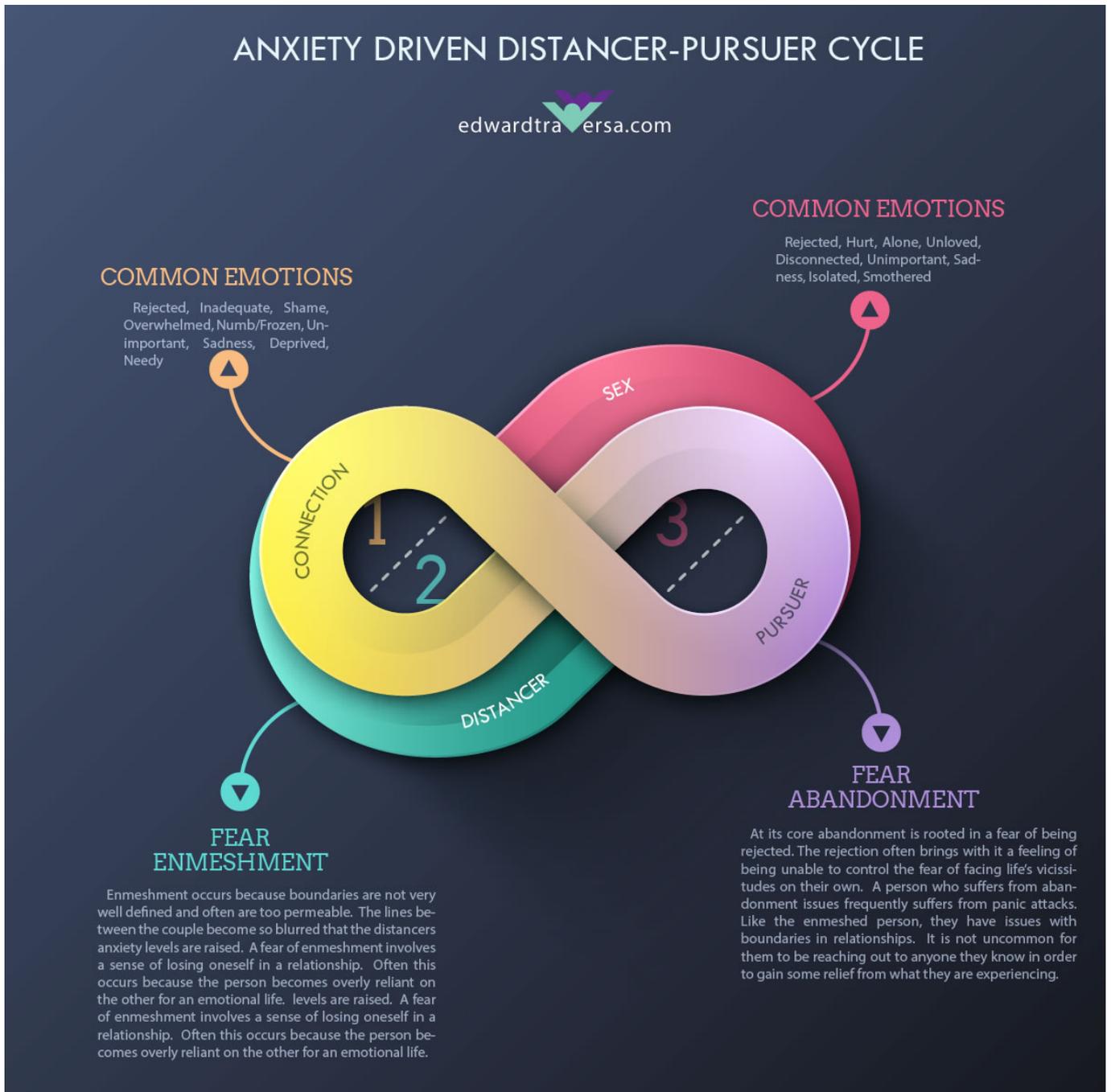
In a similar vein, a family may be racist and rear their offspring to believe in the same values. The child themselves may have opposing views, but the nature of the family makes it extremely difficult for the child to deviate from the racist viewpoints.

Enmeshment is a form of suffocation of the child's thoughts, emotions, talents, and psychological makeup etc. It is the suffocating nature of enmeshment which makes the person rebel against pressures to become closer or more intimate in adulthood. What one person perceives as a call for closeness or intimacy, the person with enmeshment issues perceives as pressure. It then makes sense for someone with enmeshment issues to distance themselves in relationships.

Sometimes enmeshment is confused with a close family. A healthy close family nurtures a child and allows the child to develop their own unique talents and abilities. A child's identity can form with the benefit of clear boundaries. Parents can nurture their children's unique talents and abilities. In this way families can be close without necessarily being enmeshed.

## **The Complexity of the Distancer and Pursuer Dynamic**

In developing an understanding of the distancer and pursuer dynamic it is important to recognize that frequently it is not an either-or proposition. Most people have a mix where they distance in one area of life and pursue in another. For instance, its relatively common for one person to pursue the other in sex, but distancing when it comes to discussing areas for improvement in the relationship. Or perhaps a person distances in financial matters, while pursuing when it comes to activities. As the next infographic demonstrates the dance which often goes on in a relationship is an intricate and complex one.



## A Way to Help

It should go without saying that change is not easy, even at the best of times. It takes a strong and determined intention and plenty of practice. Our relationship styles are often deeply and unconscious and so ingrained that it almost seems like they run on a groove.

When these styles get triggered (usually by an anxiety provoking event) our reactions become reflexive and unthinking. The first step in trying to change is to catch ourselves in these moments when we are reacting in ways which are self-defeating. We shine the light of awareness on our own actions, thoughts and emotions.

Once we catch ourselves then the next step is to take some course of action which helps ease our anxiety. It is anxiety and fear which drives much of the unwanted reactions which occur in a relationship. By implementing strategies to help deal with the anxiety and fear we deal with the problem at the coal face so to speak. The following article might provide some ideas on how to manage anxiety levels.

### [Tips for Dealing with Anxiety](#)

Ideally, we would couple the strategies with a healthy dose of self-soothing. People have all sorts of difficulties being kind and compassionate with themselves. But this is exactly what will help in the long term. The more we practice being kind and compassionate with ourselves, the more able we are to feel composed and clear. We start to feel good about ourselves and our places in the world.

It is also good to recognize that often our partner is not consciously trying to reject or overwhelm us. While we may find our partner's behaviour hard to take, we have to separate what they do and how we experience it from their intention. Often, they are acting out some powerful unconscious processes rather than consciously trying to hurt us. Like us they are trying to get their needs met, albeit in less than constructive ways.

Managing anxiety goes a long way towards helping the difficulty. On top of that, couples can negotiate times to deal with the immediate difficulties. For example, if finances are triggering the cycle, the couple negotiates a suitable time for both parties to discuss the issue. Instead of trying to resolve the problem immediately, room and space are given. It might be agreed that the problem will be discussed the following day or some time later in the week. The focus here is on managing the distance in the relationship in a manner that respects both partners needs. It might take some practice, but developing skills in negotiating and managing distance is particularly useful.

Naturally, there might be other things which may need to be addressed - communication styles, anger management, trauma etc. But the above is a good general place to start for people to begin helping themselves. It certainly helped me in my own journey.

A companion article which looks at some of the conscious things we should look for in a partner is located here:

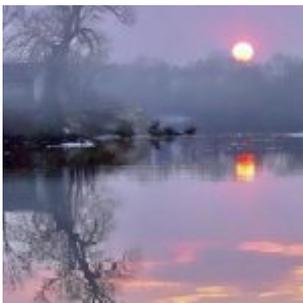
<https://edwardtraversa.com/consciously-selecting-a-life-partner/>

The next article in this series will look at some relationship red flags which people might want to consider when entering a new relationship. In later articles I will look at other common unconscious relationship dynamics. The distancer and pursuer dynamic is but one potential dynamic which can adversely affect a relationship.

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