

Managing closeness and connection in a relationship



We all have relationship styles, based on templates we have developed in our families/past relationships, that guide how we think people should relate to each other, how we should be treated, and what we need from others, and we bring these patterns of relating to our couple relationships. In the early stages of a relationship, these styles of relating can bring different strengths, but over time can also lead to difficulties or clashes, establishing unhelpful patterns that can erode our sense of connection and closeness with our partner.

The pursuing / distancing pattern

The most common pattern that impacts our negotiation of closeness is called the pursuer/distancer pattern. This is where one person withdraws or seems to have less need for closeness or communication, and the other pursues them, whether for conversation, in conflict, or in a desire for intimacy. In the early stages of a relationship this pattern seems to work fluidly and well, however as the relationship settles, and the pattern is repeated and stuck, it can lead to disappointment and clashes on both sides, hurt feelings and even doubt about the relationship. The one pursuing may end up feeling their partner is unresponsive, rejecting or uninterested, and the one withdrawing can

be left feeling smothered, pressured or never good enough. ***This pattern of pursuing and withdrawing can affect our feelings of closeness in the relationship.***

Connecting, disconnecting and reconnecting

We need to be able to both reach for the other and respond when they reach out to us. A relationship involves a constant dance of close connecting, miscues and misses, failures and hurts, repair and then falling into love and connection again. Emotional responsiveness (reaching and responding) is the key to feeling secure and close and to re-establishing the connection. When there is distance, we need to approach each other, generally both verbally and non-verbally through action. Some people approach through intimacy, affection, a soothing hug, or by initiating sex. Reaching out physically can create a feeling of closeness in the moment, but without a broader understanding of and response to what is going on between you, the pattern may not be solved and these attempts at connection may be only temporary fixes

Distance is often the underlying cause of fights, where we feel disconnected from our partner and misunderstood...and we want to find a way to get closer. Fighting can be useful to bring an issue to the surface but won't necessarily help us feel closer and more connected.

Ways to gain closeness and connection

- **Be aware of distance and disconnection** and the impact of this push/pull 'dance' and be brave enough to raise it. e.g. "When you don't want to talk about 'x' I feel hurt, upset, and don't know how to get close to you...", or "when you want to talk with me, I feel pressured to solve it and fear I will say something that you will get angry about, and I don't want to fight with you..."
- **Negotiate the space you need and agree on time together and apart.** It is normal for each to need different amounts of space for replenishment either alone or with friends and separate activities, so being clear together can ensure there are no misunderstandings.
- **Talk about the support you need from each other:** e.g. I just need to tell you about my day... or, I just need 10 mins when I get home to get changed, relax...
- **Make a time to talk about the connection,** how you think the relationship is going.
- **Make plans together** so that you create a sense of shared direction, goals, and teamwork. Closeness is feeling we understand each other and want the same things.

We hear a lot that couples need to 'work on their relationship', it's not just about resolving fights, or communicating better.... It's also about building this positive connection.

We know we have a strong emotional connection when:

1. **We feel we can depend on each other...** ... that the other person is our 'anchor in a storm', our secure home base...is accessible to us.
2. **When our bids for connection are responded to,** we hear each other, knowing the other person cares to listen, even if we are

emotional/ stressed, make no sense, or are being unreasonable. They respond to our needs by holding us in mind, wanting the best for us, soothing, comforting, and reassuring. They are our cheer squad.

3. We can show we want to connect with each other by prioritising the relationship, planning time and activities together, sharing our news, ideas and experiences.

It is important to build the feeling that the other person is there for us, available, and secure, that they put us first. This is vital for our sense of security, and our mental health.

When is it time to seek professional help?

It is a good time to see a couple counsellor when:

- You can no longer drag yourselves out of negative spirals of conflict and long silences and feel that the usual ways you could reach your partner are not working anymore.
- The communication isn't getting anywhere, you are not able to progress an issue and are repeating the same discussions with no solutions.
- You are starting to feel lonely and distant within the relationship, where the other person doesn't seem as committed to moving closer, and you are having trouble finding your way back to each other.

If you would like support in managing closeness and connection, contact RANSW on **1300 364 277** to make an appointment.

1300 364 277

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