

Why Trying to Fix a Relationship Sometimes Makes Things Worse

To end the tug-of-war, drop the rope.

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It's a puzzle: Most partners in marriages and other long-term relationships want things to work out, but many couples find their problems get worse and worse over time, and some eventually break up.

Simple explanations like incompatibility and lack of [attraction](#) don't seem sufficient because people don't pair up at random; we choose partners we think are right for us. Explanations based on individual psychopathologies are valid in some situations, such as abuse and [addiction](#), but most struggling couples consist of two good people who have trouble getting along. That's what this post is about.

It's a systems thing

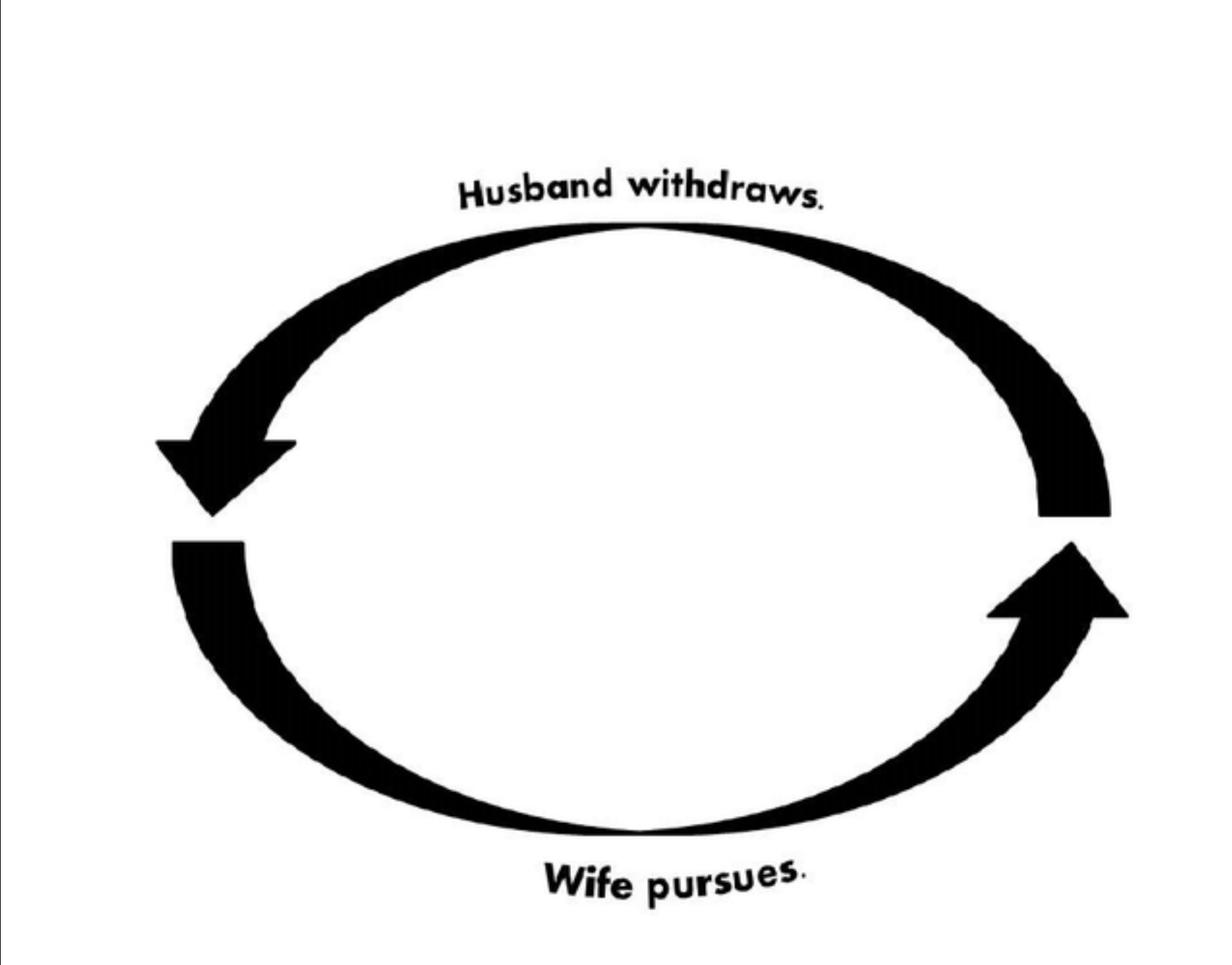
Couples therapists generally approach relationships as systems (Haley, 1996; Madanes, 1991). In this view, the nature of a relationship is not based simply on the characteristics of the individuals involved; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Interaction patterns evolve over time and take on lives of their own, sometimes with twists, turns, and the emergence of unexpected dynamics. Most couples [therapy](#) is an application of systems theory, which conceptualizes the client as the *relationship*, not simply the two individuals in that relationship.

The concept of a system provides a new way of thinking about cause and effect. Our usual, linear way of thinking about causality can be diagrammed as $A \rightarrow B$ or $B \rightarrow A$. This is how most couples initially view their problems. For example, a wife might say she withdraws from her husband because he overwhelms her with his needs, and her husband might say he pursues her so urgently because she keeps withdrawing from him. If they stick with their linear explanations, such couples will argue endlessly (or get [divorced](#)).

The chicken and the egg

Systems theory offers a more sophisticated, insightful way to understand what goes wrong in relationships. One key concept is the *feedback loop*, which describes cause and effect as circular and reciprocal. This type of causality can be diagrammed as $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \dots$ or, more succinctly, $A \leftrightarrow B$. Feedback loops can also be diagrammed, literally, as loops, since that's what they are:



In feedback loops, cause and effect blur because people influence each other in a back-and-forth fashion. In terms of our example, it could be true *both* that the wife withdraws because the husband smothers her *and* that he pursues her desperately because she is so withdrawn. There is no contradiction here—just an unfortunate synergy and a feedback loop.

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Who started it? Systems-oriented therapists do not try to answer that question because it is considered both impossible and unnecessary. The answer is hidden in the mists of the past, and the important question is what the couple can do *now* to improve their relationship.

Spinning wheels in a ditch

When relationship partners behave in ways the other dislikes, feedback loops often produce a process of mutual escalation ([Shapiro, 2020a; 2020b](#)). The partners' attempts to influence each other not only fail, they backfire: Each person's attempt to reduce the other's unwanted behavior has the unintended effect of *increasing* that behavior. It's like a tug of war in which the harder one person pulls, the harder the other pulls in the opposite direction.

In our example, a wife might have started out with just a slightly stronger need for space, and a husband might have started out with just a slightly stronger need for closeness. But watch what happens when a feedback loop takes over: When the husband wanted more connection, he moved toward his wife, interrupting her when she was busy with her own activities, and she put him off. This made him feel lonelier, so he intensified his efforts to spend time with her—which made her feel smothered, so she became more insistent on spending time separately—which hurt him even more, and his [anxiety](#) funneled into constant lobbying for more time together—and so on. A small difference became large, and a happy relationship devolved into an unhappy one.

The paradoxical feature of feedback loops is that the people actually *cause* the behaviors they dislike in each other—although, of course, without realizing it. Each person believes the other one started the cycle, and they themselves are only reacting; each believes the other person's behavior is the cause, and theirs is the effect. It might seem as if someone must be wrong, but the paradox can be resolved by system theory's concept of the feedback loop, which transcends simplistic, linear notions of cause and effect with the idea of circular, back-and-forth causality.

Whether a certain behavior is a problem or an attempted solution looks different from the two perspectives. In fact, each person's attempted solution *is* the problem from the other person's vantage point. One person's coping response is the stressor experienced by the other person and vice versa.

In feedback loops, people respond to the failure of their efforts, not by rethinking their strategy, but by intensifying the same type of behavior they were already doing—which causes the other person to respond with her own “more-of-the-same” attempted solutions (Haley, 1996; Madanes, 1991). Both people's efforts become more intense as they become less successful, but rather than trying something different, they think they failed because they did not do their behaviors *strongly* enough. So they jam their foot on the accelerator and dig their car deeper into the ditch.

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What to do?

In terms of the tug-of-war analogy, the key is to “drop the rope.” In other words, the strategy is to stop trying to drag our partners in our direction, but instead to initiate movement toward them ([Shapiro, 2020a; 2020b](#)).

When we do this, our partners usually respond by feeling like they don't have to pull so hard and can even move toward our desired way of doing things. A different kind of feedback loop can evolve, one in which the more we behave the way our partners want, the more they behave like we want. We cannot solve our problem ourselves, but we can solve our partner's problem, and they can solve ours. In this way, partners can trade solutions.

In terms of our example, this would mean the husband giving his wife enough space to at least partially fulfill her need for autonomy and start to miss him, and it would mean the wife providing enough closeness, so her husband feels sufficiently secure in the relationship to give her some space. Small movements toward each other are likely to be reciprocated, and the feedback loop can then generate its own momentum in a positive direction.

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