Negative Cycle Map

Part 1. Each partner's side of the cycle

Item	Entry
Partner A's position in the cycle	Pursues / Withdraws
Partner B's position in the cycle	Pursues / Withdraws

Trigger: what sets it off

Include: for each partner, the moment, words, tone or look that sets the cycle off.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Perception: what I tell myself it means

Include: for each partner, what they tell themselves the trigger means, in their own words.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Reactive emotion: what shows on the surface

Include: for each partner, the first emotion the other partner sees, such as anger, frustration or numbness.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Action: what I do next

Include: for each partner, what they say or do and how they say it.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Underlying emotion: what is underneath

Include: for each partner, the softer emotion under the reactive one, such as hurt, fear, loneliness or shame.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Attachment fear: what I am afraid it means about us

Include: for each partner, the fear about the relationship that the cycle touches, in their own words.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Attachment longing: what I most need from my partner

Include: for each partner, what they most need from the other when the cycle starts.

Partner A:

Partner B:

Part 2. The cycle as one loop

Partner A does Action:	→	**What Partner B makes of it** Perception: Underneath:
↑	*The cycle*	↓
What Partner A makes of it Perception: Underneath:	←	**Partner B does** Action:

The cycle in one sentence

Include: both partners' moves in one sentence: the more ..., the more ...; and the more ..., the more ....

Item	Entry
Pattern	One pursues, one withdraws / Both pursue / Both withdraw
How a typical round ends	
A name the couple uses for the cycle (optional)	

Part 3. The couple's version, to fill in between sessions

Each partner answers on their own; compare the answers at the next session.

What usually starts it for me?

Include: the moment, the words, the tone or the look that sets it off.

What do I tell myself it means in that moment?

Include: the thought that goes through my mind, in my own words.

What do I feel first, on the surface?

Include: the first feeling I notice, such as anger, frustration or numbness.

What do I do next?

Include: what I say or do, and how I say it.

What might I be feeling underneath?

Include: softer feelings such as hurt, fear, loneliness or shame.

What am I most afraid it means about us?

Include: the fear about our relationship that the fight touches.

What do I most need from you when this happens?

Include: what would help me feel safe or close in that moment.

What do I see you do, and how might my move set off yours?

Include: what my partner does, and how my move and theirs feed each other.

Our cycle in one sentence

Include: the more I ..., the more you ...; and the more you ..., the more I ....

Completed example: Marcus and Lena (a hypothetical couple)

Marcus and Lena, together 12 years with two young children, came to couples therapy after a fight in which Lena said she did not know how much longer she could do this. Both partners and every detail of their history are invented. Marcus pursues and Lena withdraws; the map shows each partner's side of their cycle, the loop that joins the two sides and the cycle in one sentence.

Part 1. Each partner's side of the cycle

Item	Entry
Marcus's position in the cycle	Pursues
Lena's position in the cycle	Withdraws

Trigger: what sets it off

Include: for each partner, the moment, words, tone or look that sets the cycle off.

Marcus: Lena's short or late replies to his texts; Lena going to her phone or to bed after the children are asleep; her flat expression when he talks.

Lena: Marcus's sharp tone when she walks in; "We need to talk"; his sigh; comments about her phone.

Perception: what I tell myself it means

Include: for each partner, what they tell themselves the trigger means, in their own words.

Marcus: "I don't matter to her. I'm last on her list."

Lena: "I've failed him again. I can't get it right."

Reactive emotion: what shows on the surface

Include: for each partner, the first emotion the other partner sees, such as anger, frustration or numbness.

Marcus: Anger, frustration.

Lena: Numbness, irritation; "I'm fine."

Action: what I do next

Include: for each partner, what they say or do and how they say it.

Marcus: Criticizes, raises his voice, follows Lena from room to room to keep talking, brings up the night at the hospital.

Lena: Goes quiet, explains herself in a flat voice, leaves the room, says she is tired, scrolls her phone.

Underlying emotion: what is underneath

Include: for each partner, the softer emotion under the reactive one, such as hurt, fear, loneliness or shame.

Marcus: Loneliness and hurt; fear of losing her.

Lena: Shame and fear of failing him; overwhelmed.

Attachment fear: what I am afraid it means about us

Include: for each partner, the fear about the relationship that the cycle touches, in their own words.

Marcus: "I'm alone. She doesn't want me."

Lena: "I'll never be enough for him. If I show him how I feel, he'll find more that's wrong with me."

Attachment longing: what I most need from my partner

Include: for each partner, what they most need from the other when the cycle starts.

Marcus: To know he matters to her and that she wants to be close.

Lena: To know she is enough as she is and that it is safe to come close.

Part 2. The cycle as one loop

Marcus does Criticizes, raises his voice, follows Lena to keep talking.	→	**What Lena makes of it** "I've failed him again." Underneath: shame, fear of not being enough.
↑	*Pursue and withdraw*	↓
What Marcus makes of it "I don't matter to her." Underneath: loneliness, fear of losing her.	←	**Lena does** Goes quiet, leaves the room, picks up her phone.

The cycle in one sentence

Include: both partners' moves in one sentence: the more ..., the more ...; and the more ..., the more ....

The more Marcus pushes to reach Lena, the more she shuts down to keep the peace; and the more she shuts down, the harder he pushes, until both are alone in it.

Item	Entry
Pattern	One pursues, one withdraws: Marcus pursues, Lena withdraws
How a typical round ends	Lena goes to bed or to the guest room; they act as if nothing happened the next morning
A name the couple uses for the cycle (optional)	"The chase"

References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Furrow, J. L., Johnson, S. M., Bradley, B., Brubacher, L., Campbell, T. L., Kallos-Lilly, V., Palmer, G., Rheem, K., & Woolley, S. R. (2022). *Becoming an emotionally focused therapist: The workbook* (2nd ed.). Routledge. Includes practice exercises and review questions for each stage. ISBN 978-0-367-48342-5.

Johnson, S. M. (2019). *Attachment theory in practice: Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) with individuals, couples, and families*. Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-4625-3824-9.

Johnson, S. M. (2020). *The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy: Creating connection* (3rd ed.). Routledge. ISBN 978-0-8153-4801-6.

Levenson, H., Jinich, S., Vaz, A., & Rousmaniere, T. (2025). *Deliberate practice in emotionally focused couple therapy*. American Psychological Association. Fourteen role-play exercises for practicing EFCT skills. ISBN 978-1-4338-4296-2.

Books for clients

Johnson, S. (2008). *Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love*. Little, Brown Spark. Includes practical exercises for couples. ISBN 978-0-316-11300-7.

Johnson, S. (2022). *The Hold Me Tight workbook: A couple's guide for a lifetime of love*. Little, Brown Spark. Exercises, conversation prompts and activities for couples. ISBN 978-0-316-44023-3.

Kallos-Lilly, V., & Fitzgerald, J. (2022). *An emotionally focused workbook for couples: The two of us* (2nd ed.). Routledge. Chapters to read, reflect on and discuss together. ISBN 978-0-367-44403-7.

Questionnaires and official forms

Danger Assessment. (n.d.). *Danger Assessment*. Free to the public; scoring and interpretation require the online training. https://www.dangerassessment.org/

Funk, J. L., & Rogge, R. D. (2007). Testing the ruler with item response theory: Increasing precision of measurement for relationship satisfaction with the Couples Satisfaction Index. *Journal of Family Psychology, 21*(4), 572–583. https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.572

Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ) screeners. (n.d.). The PHQ-9 and GAD-7, free to download; no permission is required to reproduce them. https://www.phqscreeners.com/select-screener

Rogge Lab. (n.d.). *Measures*. Couples Research. The Couples Satisfaction Index (32, 16, 8 and 4 items) and the Positive-Negative Relationship Quality scale, free for clinical and research use. https://couples-research.com/measures/