

# #1 Reason Relationships Fail: Breaking The Vicious Cycles

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There are often many factors that lead to relationship failures.

But no matter what those factors are, the ultimate factor is always a vicious cycle.

This post will help you analyze vicious cycles and teach you how to break a vicious cycle in your relationship.

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## What Are Vicious Cycles

I will define a vicious cycle as:

A vicious cycle is a pattern of thoughts and actions where both partners get stuck in fighting, revenge and, possibly, negative thinking associated to their partners.

Notice that the most dangerous types of vicious cycles involve feelings.

It's relatively easier to break up fighting and arguments and move on. But it's more dangerous when it starts involving our feelings and our judgment.

Once partners get stuck in negative thinking indeed, it's possible that the negativity "crowds out love" and, if it goes on unchecked for too long, it can also kill the love.

And that's why it's crucial that you actively break the negative cycles.

## How We Get To Cycles Begin

Healthy relationships start like this:

With a sense and a non-written agreement that both partners will make an effort to support and contribute

for the other (and for the whole).

And they expect their partners to do the same.

Basically, this is the tacit agreement:

| We each do our best to respect each other and contribute to our common good

However, this is the tacit corollary to that agreement:

| But if you stop doing your best, and if you hurt me or disappoint me, then I might stop doing my best. And I might try to hurt you back

This second corollary is what allows vicious cycles to take hold and potentially destroy so many otherwise great relationships.

Can you already see when it's riskiest that vicious cycles take hold?

**Vicious cycles are most dangerous when the relationship is composed of two individuals who are not willing to forgive.**

Of course, sometimes it's not about "willingness", but "ability" and "strength" to forgive.

Making that first step back towards reconciliation takes strength.

It takes courage and vulnerability. Be that courageous (wo)man and you've already insulated yourself from vicious cycles.

Let's now analyze the two types of vicious cycles.

## Vicious Cycles of Emotional Withdrawal

Emotional vicious cycles happen when the partners stop supporting each other.

It can start in different ways and at different times in the relationship. It can start with a [sexual rejection](#) in bed, or it can start with [criticism](#) and a big argument on a day we're particularly sensitive.

That day when our partner's actions are just that little bit more painful, then we will unconsciously vow that we will make them pay for it.

And we will hurt them by either pulling back or attacking them later on to even the score.

And guess what often happens from then on? A vicious cycle starts.

And when the mutual emotional shutdown starts, each partner feels too hurt and too "in debt" to even think they need to give to make the relationship whole again.

Mira Kirshenbaum, author of [Too Good to Leave Too Bad to Stay](#), says that she has never seen a relationship in trouble where mutual shutdown wasn't working its black magic.

## Vicious Cycle of Combativeness

The other reason why relationships fail is when negativity takes hold with arguments and fight.

Arguments start becoming more and more common, and the good times start becoming less and less.

When the vicious cycle of combativeness reaches its apex, the couple avoid each other. And every time they meet, their walls are up because they cannot see anything good coming from their partner.

That's effectively the point when the couple behaves more like enemies than supportive partners.

This is also the case that [Gottman](#) discusses in his many books on relationships. The vicious cycle of negativity does include indeed [the four horsemen of the apocalypse](#). Such as, [criticism](#), [contempt](#),

[defensiveness](#) and [stonewalling](#).

**Note:** Notice indeed that it's not just about fights and arguments. Arguments are fine.. As long as couples can go back to being supportive soon afterwards instead of getting bitter. And as long as the positive times outweigh the negative ones.

## Vicious Cycles Examples

And this is an example of the end stages of a vicious cycle. You can see what's it's the N.1 reasons why relationships fail: there's no good left. Only spite and poison.

And they got there little by little, slipping on the slippery slope of vicious cycle.

I have also done an article on [combative relationships](#), which is another advanced stage of negativity.

## How to Break Vicious Cycles

Hitting back when we are hurt is a mutual reflex, so don't be too hard on yourself if you ended up in a vicious circle.

Apply instead the exercises below to fix your relationship.

### 1. Be Proactive

Prevention is the best cure against the N.1 reason why relationships fail.

How do you do that?

Every time you see your partner pull back, every time you see your partner holding a grudge, don't do the same.

But force yourself to give.

### 2. Start Well

A great predictor of how things develop, as [Gotman found out](#), is how they start.

Make sure you start your interactions positively then.

Greet him with a smile and a huge when he comes back at home.

### 3. List of Appreciation

Write down a list of what you love about your partner and read it to each other.

### 4. List of What We Want to Hear

This exercise might sound a bit weird and it's not would I would personally go for, but Harville Hendrix, author of [Getting the Love You Want](#) recommends it.

Your partner writes a list of what they want to be appreciated for.

Then you read it and tell them every occasion you can remember when they showed those qualities.

## 5. Focus on Positives

Focus on the positives.

Think back of when things worked and focus on those time instead that on the last fight.

This is especially important for [avoidant attachment styles](#) who tend to dwell on the negatives.

## 6. Start Positive Cycles

People tend to react more more quickly and more strongly to negatives than to positives.

For example, if your partner does something nice for you, you might think “wow that’s nice,” but you don’t do or say anything.

And that’s exactly what you’ll need to fix. Reward positive behavior as soon as you see one.

As a matter of fact, look and hunt for positive behavior which you can praise!

That will help you starting positive circles.

## 7. Stubborn Giving

This is my definition for single-handedly breaking down the negativity spiral.

It means that one partner, all by himself, will give and give even in the face of a hostile partner.

Do it for a month and chance are high, very high, that your partner will also start contributing. Stubborn giving is powerful stuff.

In a nutshell, you will recognize that each single exercise is about going back to positivity.

Indeed, the big secret is [making it a habit](#) to be good to each other. [Gottman](#) says that successful relationships have a balance of 5 positive moments to 1 negative. Securing a 5 to 1 ratio will prevent vicious circle and give you a solid, healthy relationship.

### What If You Can’t Give

If you’re in a situation where you simply cannot even imagine of being nice and giving to your partner, than I see only solution for you: your partner has to do it for you.

If neither is willing, than vicious circles, the N.1 reason why relationship fail, has destroyed your relationship to.

It might be the time to break up and take your lesson learned for the future.

If you’re still ambivalent at this stage, take also a look at this article on [when it’s time to break up](#).

## One Last Effort

Before giving up, I would suggest you to force yourself into stubborn giving.

Every single person in a relationship with much negativity will answer that “no, they can’t start giving”. And they won’t.

And that’s also why most people don’t do much in life at all. They are weak in [emotional intelligence](#) and can’t see beyond their immediate fears and basest feelings.

They would rather not try then risk their ego getting hurt.

I would encourage you to be brave instead and go for it. Give stubbornly for a month. It will be hard. And if it won't work, you can tell yourself you've done your best.

And much respect to you for trying.

And if works... What a win!

You just single-handedly prevent the N.1 cause of relationship failure to ravage your life.

## SUMMARY

The N.1 reason why relationship ends is too much negativity taking hold through vicious cycles.

There are two types of vicious cycles:

1. Emotional withdrawal (at a feeling level, there's no emotional bond anymore)
2. Combativeness spiral (at the behavioral level, arguments are the only way you communicate)

Things can start off seemingly innocently, but little by little negativity builds upon itself in a vicious circle until it squeezes out all the good in you and all is left is bitterness and anger.

You fix it by focusing on the positive, giving without keeping score and breaking the negative circle with "stubborn giving".

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