

Who is Chasing Whom in Your Relationship?

A tried-and-true method for analysing the dynamics of a relationship is to consider what is sometimes called the pursuer–distancer or confronter–avoider dynamic—in other words, who is chasing whom. Observing, defining, analysing and discussing this dynamic can reveal a major theme or ‘force at play’ in a relationship. What does ‘chasing’ mean in this context, and why is it helpful to consider?

One partner can be perceived as chasing the other in various senses. The underlying theme is one of seeking connection, contact or engagement from the other person. To be content in a relationship, we need to balance two primary needs. The first is for intimacy or connectedness, and the second is for individual freedom. Couples can connect or interact in a number of ways: physically, conversationally, or simply by being in each other’s presence. One person may perceive that they are consistently initiating or seeking connection, contact or engagement significantly more than their partner.

The word ‘perceived’ is important because two people’s perspectives on the matter may differ. Both may feel that they are the chaser or the chased, either in a general sense or in particular areas of the relationship. A person may feel that they are chasing their partner in areas such as:

- Starting everyday conversations
- Initiating sexual or non-sexual touch
- Organising quality time together
- Sending text messages
- Discussing finances
- Dealing with organisational matters
- Planning for the future

It is not uncommon for people to realise, or at least perceive, that they are the one initiating almost *every* type of contact, so that the pursuer–distancer dynamic is quite pronounced. Or perhaps the pattern is very mixed, with each person chasing the other in different ways. The differences may also be either very pronounced or quite subtle.

The next consideration is whether the difference actually matters. Arguably, it only matters if it bothers either person. Perhaps it bothers one person much more than the other. From the perspective of the relationship counsellor, if it is significantly bothering either person, then it is indeed a problem for the relationship.

It can be uncomfortable to be on either side of the equation. For the chaser, it can create a powerful sense of insecurity:

“If I am the one initiating all the contact and making all the effort, does my partner really love or care for me?”

For the chased, there can be a very uncomfortable sense of being controlled, crowded or smothered.

“The pressure to be intimate is making it feel hard to breathe and is actually just pushing me away.”

Unfortunately, the two positions can reinforce each other. The more insecure the pursuer feels, the more they may seek connection. The more crowded the distancer feels, the more they may withdraw. This withdrawal can then increase the pursuer’s insecurity, leading them to chase even more. Around and around we then go.

Balancing Things Out

If the dynamic is causing a problem, the first stage is to have an honest conversation in which each person’s perspective is explored and each is given an opportunity to explain how the dynamic affects them emotionally and how it makes them feel about the relationship more generally.

This can be a delicate conversation. Hopefully, what emerges is a clear plan for how each person can alter their behaviour to create a more balanced dynamic. Relationship habits are often very hard to break for various reasons, so it is a good idea to start with some simple yet identifiable actions.

Perhaps the pursuer needs to stop chasing in one particular way, such as refraining from initiating physical touch for a specific period of time, or agreeing not to raise sensitive topics until an arranged time.

Perhaps the distancer needs to reverse the trend by deliberately initiating contact, such as by arranging some quality time, occasionally initiating affection or routinely checking in verbally with their partner. The key is for each person to move just outside their comfort zone to correct the perceived imbalance.

Sometimes, simply seeing your partner make this effort can be enough to create the feeling of a more balanced and fulfilling relationship.