



## Is Anxiety Hijacking Your Passion and Romance?

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### Do you and your partner trigger each other into reactive patterns?

Some couples slip easily into frustrating arguments. Others end up in nasty fights. Many couples turn away from each other in cold silence. As complex as these situations feel, there is a common, everyday emotion at the root of most triggered reactions: *anxiety*.

**Anxiety is the uncomfortable body sensation associated with fear, uncertainty, instability or feeling unsafe.** It's the feeling that comes just before the classic "fight, flight, freeze or fold" reaction most animals have to danger or high-stress. When you feel anxious or unsafe, passion is out of the question; you can't respond to your partner's romantic desires or expectations. A man who feels anxious can't "get it up." A woman in anxiety can't open her heart or her body to her partner.

When infants are uncomfortable or afraid, they cry out, expressing their need to be cared for. If their needs are not attended to, they begin to feel anxious. They don't know whether they will be taken care of, and being completely dependent on others, they know instinctively that they could die if they're left alone.

**In adults, the feeling of anxiety originates from the same primal part of the brain.** Anxiety is a subconscious rattling of the nervous system signaling, "I need care now!"

If you're not certain whether you'll be cared for, you feel upset or nervous. The feeling at the conscious level may be as simple as, "Something is wrong." You need some attention, and you're not getting it.

**If your partner responds with love and care, your anxiety will melt away.** You feel loved and secure. If he or she responds negatively, with disdain, withdrawal, or criticism, your anxiety blossoms into high stress — which feels like a threat to your survival. Your reaction to that threat is big: it can look loud, or sudden, like complaint or attack. Your partner then reacts to your reaction... and off you go.

Our client, Susan, described her version of the co-trigger reaction: *"I love my husband, Tim, and he loves me. But whenever I'm upset, he instantly shuts down. He feels that I'm criticizing him, just like his mother did. When he withdraws, I feel rejected. Then I feel even more anxious and try to get a connection with him. I feel ignored, so I get critical and blame him for causing these feelings of despair. I'm confused about how to be truthful. It hurts that he doesn't seem to care. He acts like I'm out of control, but I just want some attention to my needs. How can I get my needs met without driving him away? Later, he expects sex, but my heart feels so shut down, I can't open, no matter how hard I try."*

**No one is to blame here. They're both just confused about love.** Both Susan and Tim have a particular Attachment style™ — a way they respond and attach to others.

Susan's Attachment style is called *Insecure-Anxious*.

Susan responds to her feelings of anxiety by escalating and pursuing the connection to Tim. His Attachment style, however, is *Insecure-Avoidant*. He withdraws when he feels overwhelmed by her pursuit. He is so quick to withdraw that he doesn't even know that beneath the surface, he's also anxious. He feels flooded by her anxiety and pursuit, and his hair-trigger reaction wants only one thing: to be as far away from that feeling as possible. Susan then feels abandoned. This heightens her anxiety, which further inflames the reactive cycle.

In psychological literature, your "attachment style" describes the way you form and maintain attachments to the people you love. It's how you bonded (or didn't bond) with your primary love sources — especially your mother and father. As an infant, you needed the feeling of security, safety, and love from your caregivers, but they may not have responded ideally.

**If your mother consistently responded to your needs as a top priority, you learned that you could count on being cared for.** Love was dependable. If she responded sometimes but not others (because of her own issues or her other commitments), you felt anxious much of the time: *"Will she take care of me this time? Is she going to be here or not?"*

This feeling of doubt and mistrust may be operating in your adult relationship. If you're an Insecure-Anxious type, you're likely to be a little preoccupied with being loved or cared for: *"Is he available? Does she love me enough? Is there something I can do to get the love I need? Is there someone else? Is he going to respond when I need him?"* You may feel a constant, low-grade anxiety that is with you all the time. It might even feel normal — but it's not. Healthy, secure love allows you to trust and rest easy.

Susan lives with the daily frustration of, *"I need him but I can't count on him."* Tim doesn't have a skillful way to deal with her chronic anxiety, so he withdraws. He has no idea that his resistance to her anxiety is actually fueling it.

**This is a classic example of a co-triggering-and-escalation cycle.** Tim's emotional abandonment snuffs out of her all desire and capacity for intimacy. He's been frustrated with their lack of sex for awhile. She can't explain why she feels repulsed by his advances. They're caught in a classic loop. They need help.

**Their work begins with an understanding of their different Attachment style.**

When you learn about your own and your partner's Attachment style, you'll gain new insights into what's going on between your different bonding strategies and develop new options for dealing with those co-triggering reactions.

If you have repeated problems or arguments in your relationship, it doesn't mean that you're unlovable, nor that you don't know how to love. ***You're simply confused about how to love.***

When you learn about your own Attachment style, and your partner's Attachment style, there's less reactivity. The cycles are slowed down and you begin to care for each others' true needs. Using simple practices to re-program your original bonding pattern, anxiety is reduced and you both return to feelings of security and love. ***When you both feel cared for, genuine passion gets re-ignited automatically.*** In therapy and counseling, you can learn techniques and practices that can gently, steadily rewire your reactive childhood patterns so you can shift your Attachment style from insecure and anxious to *secure love you can count on.*