An Analysis of the Formation Mechanism of Attachment Anxiety in Cold Wars within Intimate Relationships

Gao Chen[1]*

[1] Southwest University, China
* Correspondence: Southwest University, China.

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Abstract: Cold wars in intimate relationships involve silence, emotional distance, and avoidance, which can heighten attachment anxiety. This paper explores how emotional withdrawal leads to threat perception, negative interpretation, rumination, and reassurance-seeking, reinforcing a pursuit-withdrawal cycle. It also outlines factors that intensify this pattern and suggests strategies such as clear communication, emotional regulation, and stronger boundaries to reduce anxiety.

Keywords: intimate relationships; cold wars; emotional withdrawal; rumination

1. Introduction

Conflict is common in intimate relationships, as partners may disagree over daily habits, emotional needs, or future plans. Some individuals choose to address these issues through direct communication, while others withdraw and enter what is often referred to as a "cold war." This state is not merely a brief cooling-off period, but a prolonged form of emotional disengagement in which communication is reduced or completely halted, leaving the underlying conflict unresolved (Wright & Roloff, 2009).

Moderate silence can sometimes help regulate emotions. However, when silence lacks explanation, clear time boundaries, or a plan for resuming communication, it becomes ambiguous and unsettling. The partner who is ignored often struggles to understand the status of the relationship, and silence may be interpreted as a sign of instability (Williams, 2007; Wright & Roloff, 2009). This situation is particularly challenging for individuals with attachment anxiety. Attachment anxiety refers to a strong fear of rejection or abandonment in close relationships, accompanied by a need for clear emotional reassurance to feel loved and accepted (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson & Rholes, 2017).

During a cold war, the absence of communication makes it difficult for anxiously attached individuals to maintain a sense of security. They may repeatedly check messages, revisit past conversations, overanalyze their partner's behavior, and engage in self-blame or catastrophic thinking (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). The lack of information created by silence is often filled with negative assumptions—for example, interpreting delayed responses as intentional neglect or emotional distance as a loss of affection. These

cognitive distortions intensify anxiety and can interfere with daily functioning.

Cold wars can trigger a "pursuit–withdrawal" cycle (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Papp et al., 2009). The anxious partner may attempt to restore closeness through frequent contact or emotional expression, while the other partner, feeling pressured, may withdraw even further. This dynamic can escalate tension within the relationship. The digital communication environment also amplifies uncertainty; for instance, seeing a partner online without receiving a reply can easily be perceived as rejection (Fox & Warber, 2014).

Therefore, attachment anxiety during cold wars is not solely a result of individual traits but is also shaped by interaction patterns and communication styles. Understanding this process can help individuals respond more effectively to emotional challenges within relationships.

2. Cold Wars as a Form of Relational Withdrawal

A cold war in a close relationship often starts after a disagreement, hurt, or unmet need. The problem is not talked about. One or both partners talk less and show less emotion. They may still live together or stay in the relationship, but normal interaction becomes hard. Daily talk is short, emotional response is weak, and attempts to discuss the issue may get no reply.

Relational withdrawal is not just less talking. It also means less attention, care, support, and physical closeness. The withdrawing partner may avoid conflict because talking feels tiring or painful. Silence can also show anger. Sometimes, the person expects the other to understand the reason without explanation. The other partner must guess what happened and what the silence means.

This withdrawal has a strong effect because close relationships need regular emotional response (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Partners expect to be seen, heard, and valued. When this stops, it may feel like rejection. The partner who wants contact may feel lonely and may question the relationship.

2.1 Main Features of Cold Wars

Less communication is a clear sign. Conversations become short and only about basic things like food, work, or bills. The conflict is avoided. Emotional topics are not discussed. Questions may get one-word answers or no reply. The amount of communication also drops. A couple who talks often may stop sharing daily life. Messages are fewer. Calls are not answered. A message may be read but not answered. Replies may come late and have little emotion. This change affects meaning. A simple reply like "fine" may feel cold. The partner may focus on tone, timing, and small details because clear information is missing. Emotional distance is common. A partner may be present but not warm. Eye contact is avoided. The person may stop asking about feelings. Support may disappear. This can hurt more than being apart. When partners are together but do not respond, it is hard to ignore. The anxious partner may see the other acting normal but not communicating.

Delayed or no replies also matter. A delay may not mean rejection, but during conflict it may feel like it does. The waiting partner may see it as intentional. No reply often leads to repeated checking. The person may check the phone many times. Each check brings hope. When no reply comes, anxiety grows. Physical contact may also stop. Partners may not hug, sit close, or sleep together. One may turn away or sleep elsewhere. Touch is important because it shows care. A hug can show the relationship is safe. When touch stops, the anxious partner may feel less secure. Daily routines may change. Partners may stop eating or going out together. One may avoid the other. Daily life continues, but emotional connection drops. These changes make the conflict feel bigger. It spreads into daily life. The anxious partner may feel everything has changed.

2.2 Differences between Temporary Silence and Relational Cold Wars

Not all silence is a cold war. Short silence can be healthy when emotions are strong. A person may need time to calm down and think.

The key difference is clarity. A healthy pause includes explanation. A partner may say they need time and will talk later. This shows communication will continue. A short pause does not harm basic security. Both know they will talk again. Silence supports communication. Silence becomes harmful when used to avoid conflict for a long time. Some people avoid emotional talk. They may think ignoring the problem will help. Avoidance may reduce stress for a short time, but the problem stays. One partner may keep asking. The other may withdraw more. New problems may appear. Avoidant silence is unclear. The partner does not say when or if they will talk. The other person feels unsure. Silence can also be punishment. A partner may stop talking to show anger or cause guilt. The goal is to force change. This creates imbalance. One controls when communication starts and stops. The other has little chance to respond. This can become emotional control. A partner may use silence to gain power. The other may accept blame to restore contact. The difference is in how silence is used. Healthy silence has a reason and an end. Controlling silence does not. Time matters, but not alone. Short silence can still hurt if used as punishment. Long silence may be okay if both agree. Meaning depends on purpose and clarity.

2.3 The Uncertainty Created by Cold Wars

Uncertainty is central. The ignored partner gets little information. The person may not know what caused the reaction or what the silence means. This leads to guessing. The anxious partner may think about the conflict again and again to find a reason (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). This rarely works because the needed answer is missing. The person may change explanations often. Silence may seem like anger at one moment and loss of love at another. It becomes hard to read feelings. Usual signs like warmth and touch disappear. The anxious partner loses signals of safety. Neutral actions may seem negative. Normal behavior may be seen as rejection. Digital communication can make this worse. A partner may be active online but not reply. This may feel like being ignored on purpose. Online signs are not always clear, but the anxious partner may still use them as clues. Checking becomes frequent. Fear of breakup grows. There is no clear end, but no clear safety either. The person feels stuck between hope and fear. This is harder than clear conflict. There is no clear problem to solve. The anxious partner does not know what to do. Fear grows more if the relationship is tied to self-worth. Silence may feel like personal failure. Past experiences also matter. Someone with past rejection may react more strongly. Old memories affect current feelings (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). The anxious partner may try to reduce uncertainty by reaching out. Messages and calls increase. No reply increases fear. Uncertainty affects daily life. Focus drops. Sleep may be disturbed. Work feels less important. Emotions change often. Small signs bring hope. Silence brings fear again. This cycle makes calm hard to keep.

3. Attachment Anxiety and the Need for Emotional Security

Attachment anxiety is closely related to a person's sense of safety in intimate relationships. People with attachment anxiety often want a high level of closeness, but they are not sure whether this closeness will continue (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). They may feel loved when the partner is warm and responsive. When the partner becomes distant, their sense of safety can quickly weaken (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).

This form of anxiety is not only a wish to receive more attention. It includes a deep concern that care may be withdrawn without warning. The person may worry that the partner will lose interest, choose someone else, or end the relationship. These fears can remain present even when there is no clear sign of separation.

Cold wars can make these fears much stronger. Communication becomes limited, emotional support is reduced, and the partner's intentions are unclear. The person with attachment anxiety then loses many of the signals that usually create security. Silence is often read as a threat because it removes the expected signs of love, acceptance, and commitment.

3.1 The Basic Meaning of Attachment Anxiety

A strong need for closeness is one of the main features of attachment anxiety. People with this tendency often want frequent communication and clear emotional contact. They may feel comfortable when the partner shares feelings, replies to messages, spends time with them, and gives direct signs of care.

This need is not always shown through direct requests. Some people may avoid saying that they feel insecure because they fear appearing weak or dependent. They may try to gain closeness through frequent messages, repeated questions, emotional complaints, or close attention to the partner's behaviour.

Reassurance has an important role in this pattern. The person may need to hear that the relationship is stable and that the partner still cares. One statement of reassurance may provide relief, but the effect may not last for long. A later delay, cold reply, or change in mood can bring the fear back.

This repeated need for reassurance comes from weak internal security. The person finds it difficult to believe that the relationship remains stable when the partner is not actively showing care. Love must be confirmed again through words, replies, touch, or shared time. When these signs are absent, the person may assume that the relationship has changed.

Sensitivity to rejection is another key feature. People with attachment anxiety often notice small changes in their partner's behaviour. They may pay attention to reply speed, tone of voice, facial expression, body position, and the amount of time spent together. These details help them judge whether the partner is emotionally close or distant.

A minor change may receive more attention than it deserves. A tired voice may be understood as annoyance. A short message may be treated as emotional withdrawal. A request for personal space may be seen as a sign that the partner no longer wants the relationship. The anxious person often reacts to the possible meaning of the behaviour rather than the behaviour itself.

Fear of abandonment is usually stronger than ordinary concern about conflict. Most people feel uncomfortable when a partner becomes distant. A person with attachment anxiety may experience the same distance as a sign of possible loss. The emotional response can be intense even when the conflict is temporary.

This fear can lead to constant preparation for rejection. The person may look for signs that the partner is planning to leave. Positive behaviour may be treated as temporary, while negative behaviour is taken as more reliable. A warm interaction may create comfort for a short time, but one period of silence can become proof that the relationship is unsafe.

Attachment anxiety is also linked to doubt about personal value (Murray et al., 2000). The person may not only ask whether the partner still cares. They may also ask whether they are worthy of love. Conflict can quickly become a judgment about the self.

When the partner withdraws, the anxious person may think that they are too difficult, unattractive, demanding, or unimportant. The partner's silence is then understood as a result of personal weakness. Instead of viewing the cold war as a communication problem between two people, the person may treat it as proof that they have failed in the relationship.

This self-doubt can make it hard to express real needs. The person may fear that asking for respect, time, or emotional support will push the partner away. They may accept unfair treatment to avoid separation. They may also apologize repeatedly even when responsibility for the conflict is shared.

The need to protect the relationship can become stronger than the need to protect personal boundaries. The person may stop discussing their

own hurt and focus only on restoring contact. When the partner begins communicating again, the relief may be so strong that the original problem is left unresolved.

3.2 Sources of Attachment Anxiety

Attachment anxiety may be connected to unstable emotional care in early life (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). A child learns about emotional security through repeated contact with caregivers. When care is steady and available, the child can develop the expectation that support will be provided when needed.

Care is not always stable. A caregiver may be warm at some times and distant at others. Responses may depend on mood, stress, work, health, or family conflict. The child cannot easily predict whether comfort will be available. This uncertainty can increase attention to the caregiver's emotional state. The child may learn to watch facial expressions, tone, and behaviour closely. Strong emotional expression may also become a way to gain attention. Crying, clinging, or repeated requests for comfort may work at some times but fail at others. The child receives the message that closeness is possible, but it is not secure.

These early experiences do not directly decide how every later relationship will develop. They can still shape basic expectations about closeness. A person may enter an adult relationship with the belief that care can disappear quickly and that emotional security requires constant effort.

Previous experiences of rejection can also increase attachment anxiety. A sudden breakup may create fear that another relationship will end in the same way. Being left without an explanation can make silence especially threatening. The person may connect current distance with the earlier loss even when the situations are different.

Betrayal can have a similar effect. A partner may have lied, hidden another relationship, or continued to act normally while preparing to leave. After such an experience, ordinary signs of privacy or distance may seem dangerous. The person may believe that important changes can happen without their knowledge.

Emotional neglect can also leave a lasting effect. A person may have remained in a relationship where feelings were often ignored. They may have asked for support and received indifference. This can create the belief that emotional needs are too heavy or that love must be earned through patience and self-sacrifice.

Public rejection or humiliation may affect later trust as well. If a previous partner ended a relationship in a hurtful way, shared private information, or compared the person with someone else, fear may continue after the event. New conflicts can activate shame as well as anxiety.

Repeated insecurity in the current relationship may strengthen attachment anxiety even when it was not strong at the beginning. A partner may often threaten separation during arguments, disappear without explanation, or change between warmth and distance. These patterns make the relationship difficult to predict.

Unstable contact can be especially powerful. The partner may be caring after a period of withdrawal and then become distant again. The anxious person receives relief when closeness returns, but this relief is mixed with fear that it will disappear. The person may then invest more effort in keeping the partner close.

Repeated cold wars can train the anxious partner to expect withdrawal after conflict. Even a small disagreement may create fear because it has often been followed by silence. The person begins to react not only to the present issue but also to earlier cold wars in the same relationship.

Promises that are not kept can also weaken security. A partner may agree to communicate more clearly but return to silence during the next conflict. The anxious person may stop trusting verbal reassurance. More proof is then required before the relationship feels safe.

Inconsistent affection may create similar uncertainty. A partner may show strong love during good periods but become completely unavailable when problems appear. The anxious person may not

know which side reflects the partner's true feelings. This question can keep attention fixed on every emotional change.

Attachment anxiety may also be affected by low self-esteem, social isolation, and heavy dependence on the relationship. When a person has few sources of support, the partner may become the main source of comfort, belonging, and recognition. Any threat to the relationship then carries greater emotional weight.

A person who has a stable social network may still feel hurt by a cold war, but support from friends, family, work, or personal interests can reduce total dependence on the partner's response. Without these supports, silence may feel like the loss of the person's whole emotional world.

3.3 Attachment Needs in Intimate Relationships

Emotional availability is a basic attachment need. It means that a partner is willing to notice emotional signals and respond when support is needed. The person does not need to solve every problem. Listening, showing concern, and remaining emotionally present can already create a sense of safety.

Availability also means that emotional contact does not disappear whenever conflict occurs. Partners may feel angry or disappointed, but they can still show that the relationship has not been abandoned. A simple statement such as "I am upset, but I still care about us" can separate the conflict from the value of the relationship.

People with attachment anxiety often need this separation to be made clear. Without it, they may believe that anger means loss of love. They may see the partner's wish for space as a wish to leave. Clear emotional availability can reduce this confusion.

Stable responses are also important. Stability does not mean that a person must always be calm, warm, or ready to talk. It means that the general pattern of response is predictable. The partner explains when space is needed, avoids sudden disappearance, and returns to the conversation as promised.

Predictability helps a person manage temporary distance. A partner may say that they need two hours to calm down and will talk later. The other person may still feel uncomfortable, but there is a clear structure. The pause has a reason and an expected end.

Cold wars remove this structure. The partner may stop communicating without saying when contact will resume. The anxious person cannot prepare for the length or meaning of the silence. Waiting becomes harder because there is no clear point at which the issue will be discussed.

Stable responses also require some consistency between words and actions. A partner may say that the relationship matters but repeatedly use silence as punishment. This difference weakens trust. The anxious person may rely less on verbal reassurance and watch behaviour more closely.

Clear signs of care and commitment help maintain security during conflict. These signs can include direct statements, respectful behaviour, physical closeness, shared plans, and willingness to solve problems. They show that conflict has occurred within the relationship, not that the relationship has disappeared.

Commitment is especially important when emotions are negative. It is easy to show care when both partners are calm. Security depends more on how care is handled during stress. A partner who remains respectful during conflict sends the message that anger does not remove basic concern.

This does not require immediate agreement. Partners can disagree strongly and still avoid threats, insults, disappearance, or emotional punishment. They can state that more time is needed while confirming that the issue will be addressed.

For a person with attachment anxiety, signs of commitment reduce the need to search constantly for hidden meanings. The person does not have to judge the whole relationship through one delayed reply or one change in tone. The basic bond remains visible even when the problem has not been solved.

The need for reassurance should not be treated as shameful, but it also cannot depend entirely on one partner's constant response. A secure relationship allows needs to be expressed directly. It also gives

both people room to manage emotions without making temporary distance feel like abandonment. Clear communication supports this balance. A person can say, "I need some time alone," while also saying, "I will contact you tonight." The message protects personal space and keeps the relationship emotionally present. When such communication is absent, attachment needs remain active but have no reliable way to receive an answer.

4. Threat Perception during Relational Cold Wars

Attachment anxiety often becomes stronger when a person believes that an important relationship is under threat. The threat does not need to be clearly stated. A change in communication, a cold reply, or a period of silence may be enough to create fear. People with attachment anxiety are often sensitive to signs of rejection, so they may notice relational changes earlier and react to them more strongly.

A cold war provides many possible threat signals but little clear information. The withdrawing partner may not explain why communication has stopped. The anxious partner then has to judge the meaning of silence through small details. These details may include message length, reply speed, facial expression, body position, online activity, and changes in daily routines.

The anxious person does not examine these signals from a neutral position. Fear of abandonment is already present. This fear affects what the person notices and how each detail is explained. Behaviour that could have several meanings is often linked to rejection. The person may know that the partner is tired, busy, or angry, but the possibility of losing the relationship receives more attention.

Threat perception is not the same as the actual condition of the relationship. A partner's silence may reflect anger, emotional overload, or poor communication skills. The anxious person may still experience it as evidence that love is disappearing. The emotional reaction is based on the meaning given to the silence, not only on the silence itself.

4.1 Silence as a Sign of Possible Rejection

Silence can be understood in many ways. A person may be trying to calm down, avoid saying something hurtful, or think about the conflict. The same silence can also be used to punish or control a partner. During a cold war, the purpose is often not stated. The anxious partner may then choose the most threatening explanation.

Withdrawal is often interpreted as dislike. The person may believe that the partner no longer wants to listen, communicate, or spend time together. A refusal to discuss the conflict may be read as a refusal of the person as a whole. The difference between rejecting a conversation and rejecting a partner becomes unclear.

This interpretation can appear quickly. The anxious person may not wait for more information before deciding what the silence means. A partner who turns away, leaves the room, or stops replying may seem to be showing dislike directly. The person may think that the partner feels tired of them or regrets entering the relationship.

These thoughts often contain a judgment about personal value. The anxious partner may ask what is wrong with them rather than what is happening between the two people. Silence may lead to thoughts such as "I am too difficult," "I have become a burden," or "My partner does not enjoy being with me anymore." The person moves from observing the partner's behaviour to making a negative judgment about the self.

This shift increases emotional pain. Anger about poor communication becomes mixed with shame and fear. The person is not only waiting for a reply. They are also waiting to learn whether they are still accepted. Each moment of silence may feel like a delay in receiving that answer. Delayed responses can also be connected with loss of love. In ordinary situations, a late reply may have little meaning. During a cold war, reply time becomes an important emotional sign. The anxious person may remember how quickly the partner replied before the conflict and compare it with the current delay.

A longer delay may be treated as proof that the partner's feelings have changed. The person may

think that someone who still cared would answer sooner. This belief turns reply speed into a direct measure of love, even though communication habits can change for many reasons.

The anxious partner may watch the phone closely after sending a message. A few minutes without a reply may create discomfort. As more time passes, discomfort can turn into fear. The person may begin to imagine that the partner has decided to ignore them completely.

Read receipts and online status can make this experience more difficult. When a message has been read but not answered, the anxious person may see the silence as a deliberate choice. If the partner is active on another platform, the sense of rejection may become stronger. The person may think, "There is time for everyone else, but not for me."

This comparison gives the delay a personal meaning. The issue is no longer that the partner is not ready to talk. It appears that the partner is willing to communicate but has chosen to exclude the anxious person. That belief can create anger, humiliation, and a strong need to demand an explanation.

The partner may later give a simple reason for the delay, but the anxious person may find it hard to accept. Once the delay has been connected with loss of love, a practical explanation can seem weak. The person may continue to ask why the partner did not send even a short reply.

Emotional distance may also be treated as a sign of breakup. A cold war often changes the normal pattern of closeness. Shared activities stop, physical contact decreases, and conversation becomes limited. The anxious person may see these changes as preparation for separation.

The partner may not mention ending the relationship. The anxious person may still believe that the decision has already been made. Silence then seems like the period before a final breakup. The person may expect the partner to leave once practical matters are arranged or once enough emotional distance has been created.

This fear can be linked to earlier experiences. A previous partner may have become distant before ending the relationship. A caregiver may have withdrawn affection during conflict. The current silence can bring back the same expectation. The person may feel that they already know what will happen next, even when the present relationship is different.

The anxious partner may also treat emotional distance as evidence of another relationship. Reduced contact, private phone use, or a change in routine may create suspicion. There may be no direct evidence of betrayal, but the person may connect several unclear details and form a threatening explanation.

The possibility of betrayal may feel more believable when the partner refuses to talk. Silence prevents the anxious person from checking whether the fear is reasonable. The lack of explanation itself may then be treated as proof that something is being hidden.

Fear of breakup can lead to urgent attempts to restore closeness. The person may send long messages, apologize repeatedly, or ask for a direct answer about the relationship. These actions are often attempts to stop the feared loss before it happens.

The urgency may make calm communication difficult. The anxious person may ask many questions at once or demand immediate reassurance. The withdrawing partner may feel pressured and provide even less information. The resulting silence appears to confirm the original fear of rejection.

4.2 Increased Attention to Negative Signals

Attachment anxiety changes the way attention is used during a cold war. The anxious person becomes highly alert to any sign that may show the partner's feelings. Attention stays focused on the relationship even when the person is working, studying, resting, or talking with others.

Repeated message checking is a common sign of this state. The person may open the same conversation many times, even when there is no new notification. They may check whether a message has been delivered, read, or deleted. They may also review

older messages to compare the partner's earlier tone with the current one.

Each check is linked to the hope of receiving reassurance. The person expects that a reply may reduce fear. When no reply appears, anxiety remains. The person may check again after a few minutes because the need for certainty has not been met.

This behaviour can continue for hours. The anxious person may keep the phone nearby during meals, work, or sleep. A notification from another app may cause a quick emotional reaction because it is mistaken for the partner's reply. Relief disappears when the person sees that the message came from someone else.

Repeated checking does not solve the uncertainty. It keeps the person's attention on the absence of a response. Each check becomes another reminder that communication has not resumed. The person may feel unable to stop because not checking also creates fear that an important message will be missed.

The anxious partner may also monitor online activity. They may notice when the partner was last active, what content was liked, or whether new people were followed. These details become material for judging the relationship.

Online activity can be especially confusing because it shows behaviour without explaining its meaning. A partner may like a post without thinking deeply about it. The anxious person may see the same action as proof that the partner is relaxed and happy while ignoring the relationship.

A new follower, comment, or photograph may also receive strong attention. The person may search for a connection between the online action and the cold war. A normal social interaction can then appear to be a sign of replacement, betrayal, or loss of interest.

Changes in tone and behaviour are watched closely as well. The anxious partner may notice whether the other person uses a usual nickname, adds an emoji, makes eye contact, or sits nearby. A small change can seem important because direct emotional communication has stopped.

A short sentence may be examined many times. The person may ask whether the reply sounds angry, final, or uninterested. Punctuation may also be given emotional meaning. A full stop, missing emoji, or formal word may seem to show distance.

Face-to-face behaviour receives the same close attention. The anxious person may watch how the partner enters the room, places personal items, eats, or prepares to leave. They may look for signs that the partner is avoiding contact on purpose.

This close observation can create a state of constant tension. The person is always waiting for the next relational signal. Ordinary actions are no longer ordinary because each one may answer the question of whether the relationship is safe.

Negative details often receive more weight than positive ones. A partner may complete a helpful task, remain at home, or show small signs of care. The anxious person may notice these actions but still focus on one cold reply. The negative signal seems more truthful because it matches the fear already present.

Positive signs may be explained away. A kind action may be treated as habit, politeness, or guilt rather than love. A brief conversation may be seen as practical rather than emotional. The person may think that the partner is only keeping peace until the relationship ends.

Negative signals are treated differently. A delayed reply or distant expression may be viewed as direct evidence of rejection. The person rarely asks whether the detail has a neutral explanation. Fear makes the threatening meaning feel more convincing.

This imbalance can affect memory. The anxious person may remember the partner's cold words clearly but have difficulty recalling recent signs of commitment. Earlier conflicts may also return to mind. The present silence begins to look like part of a long pattern, even when earlier events were resolved.

The person may collect negative details as if building a case. A delayed reply, an avoided glance, and a change in plans may be placed together. Each

detail seems to support the others. The combined picture appears more certain than any single fact.

This process can make reassurance difficult. When the partner says that the relationship is not ending, the anxious person may compare the statement with the negative details already collected. Words may be seen as less reliable than observed behaviour.

Close attention to negative signals can also affect the anxious partner's own behaviour. The person may become quiet, angry, or suspicious before receiving a clear explanation. The partner then notices this tension and may respond defensively. A reaction based on a possible threat can create new conflict in the real relationship.

The anxious person may also test the partner's feelings. They may stop messaging to see whether the partner notices, post something online to attract attention, or mention another person to create jealousy. These tests are meant to gain information, but their meaning is often unclear to the other partner.

When the expected response does not appear, the person may treat the failed test as proof of rejection. The partner may not know that a test was taking place. The anxious person still reads the lack of response as a meaningful choice.

4.3 Unclear Situations and Imagined Threats

A cold war creates gaps in information. The anxious partner does not know what the other person is thinking, how long the silence will continue, or whether the relationship is still secure. The mind often tries to fill these gaps because uncertainty is difficult to tolerate.

Missing information is commonly filled with negative explanations. The person may think that the partner is planning to leave, talking to someone else, or waiting for a chance to end the relationship. These explanations are not based on a direct statement. They are formed from fear, past experience, and unclear signs.

The negative explanation may begin as one possible answer. Repeated thinking can make it feel more certain. The person imagines the same outcome many times and becomes emotionally used to treating it as real. The fear then shapes later interpretations.

For example, a partner may ask for time alone. The anxious person may first wonder whether the partner needs to calm down. Later, the person may think that the partner is reconsidering the whole relationship. After more rumination, the person may become convinced that a breakup decision has already been made.

The facts have not changed, but the meaning has become more threatening. The person's own thoughts create a sense of movement toward loss. This can happen without any new information from the partner. Assuming the worst may feel protective. The anxious person may believe that expecting rejection will reduce the shock if it happens. They may think it is safer to prepare for loss than to trust a positive outcome.

This form of preparation rarely brings calm. The person experiences the pain of rejection before rejection has occurred. They may cry, lose sleep, or become unable to concentrate because the imagined event feels close and real. The person may also begin to act according to the worst possible outcome. They may demand a final answer, accuse the partner of betrayal, or threaten to leave before being left. These actions are attempts to gain control over a feared event.

Acting early can create the conflict that the person fears. A partner who only wanted time to calm down may feel attacked by accusations. The partner may then withdraw further or question the future of the relationship. The imagined threat begins to affect actual behaviour between the couple.

Past experience often provides the content of imagined threats. A person who was cheated on may imagine another betrayal. A person who was suddenly abandoned may expect the same type of breakup. Someone who grew up with unstable care may believe that affection can disappear after any mistake.

The current cold war gives these older fears a place to return. The person may react to the present partner as if the earlier event is happening again.

Emotional memory can be stronger than the clear differences between the two situations.

Uncertainty becomes emotional danger when it is treated as proof that the relationship is unsafe. Not knowing why the partner is silent is different from knowing that the partner wants to leave. Attachment anxiety can weaken this difference.

The person may believe that a secure partner would never create uncertainty. Since uncertainty exists, the relationship must already be in danger. This belief turns a lack of information into negative information.

Physical reactions can make the threat feel even more real. The person may experience a fast heartbeat, chest pressure, stomach discomfort, shaking, or difficulty sleeping. These reactions show that the body is under stress, but the person may interpret them as proof that something serious must be happening.

The stronger the physical reaction becomes, the more convincing the imagined threat may feel. The person may think, "I would not feel this afraid unless the relationship was truly ending." Emotion is then used as evidence about the partner's intention.

Rumination keeps the imagined threat active (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The person repeatedly asks what the silence means, what mistake was made, and what will happen next. No clear answer is available, so the same questions return. Each round of thinking may produce a more negative explanation. The person may start with concern about one conflict and end with doubts about the whole relationship. Past disagreements, personal weaknesses, and possible future losses become connected.

Attempts to gain certainty can also create new uncertainty. The anxious partner may send a message and then worry about whether it was too emotional. They may delete a message and wonder whether the partner saw it. They may apologize and then fear that the apology made them appear guilty. Every action becomes another object of analysis. The person no longer thinks only about the partner's silence. They also examine their own attempts to repair the relationship. This expands the number of details that can be given a threatening meaning.

The unclear state may continue even after communication resumes. The anxious person may still question whether the partner's warmth is real or temporary. They may fear that the conflict has caused hidden damage. A normal reply may reduce anxiety for a short time but may not restore full security.

The person may then seek stronger proof of commitment. They may ask for promises, repeated explanations, or more frequent contact. When the partner cannot provide constant reassurance, uncertainty returns. The need to remove every doubt becomes difficult to satisfy.

Cold wars are especially likely to produce imagined threats when there are no shared rules for handling conflict. The partners may not know how long a cooling-off period should last or how contact will resume. Each conflict is handled through personal habits rather than a clear agreement.

The anxious partner may see any pause as abandonment, while the other partner sees silence as a normal way to manage anger. Neither person clearly explains this difference. The same behaviour then has two very different meanings inside the relationship.

The withdrawing partner may believe that silence prevents harm. The anxious partner experiences the silence as harm itself. Without direct discussion, both people continue to act according to their own understanding. The gap between these meanings leaves more room for fear, guessing, and imagined loss.

5. Negative Cognition and Emotional Amplification

A relational cold war does not produce attachment anxiety only through silence itself. The anxious partner also gives meaning to that silence. When communication is limited, the person may rely on personal beliefs, past experiences, and emotional guesses to explain what is happening. These explanations are often negative.

The person may blame themselves for the conflict, imagine the worst result, or review the same details many times. These thoughts increase fear and make the partner's withdrawal feel more serious. Strong emotions then make negative thoughts appear more believable. Thought and emotion begin to support each other.

A person who feels afraid may pay more attention to signs of rejection. These signs create more fear. Anger may lead to harsh messages, while shame may stop the person from expressing real needs. Sadness can make the relationship appear hopeless. Helplessness can create a strong need for the partner to end the pain through immediate contact.

5.1 Self-Blame

Self-blame often appears when the anxious partner cannot obtain a clear explanation for the cold war. The person knows that the partner has withdrawn but does not fully understand why. To fill this gap, the person may assume that they caused the problem.

The conflict is then treated as proof of personal failure. The person may believe that a good partner would have prevented the disagreement or known how to repair it quickly. Since the cold war continues, the person may decide that they have failed in the relationship.

This view places too much responsibility on one person. Conflict usually comes from the words, needs, habits, and reactions of both partners. The anxious person may still review only their own behaviour. They may ask what they said wrong, why they reacted emotionally, or why they could not keep the partner happy.

The person may turn a single mistake into a general judgment about the self. Saying something hurtful during an argument may become "I always ruin everything." Asking for more attention may become "I am too demanding." Feeling upset may become "I am difficult to love."

These judgments do not stay connected to the specific event. They affect the person's full sense of value. The anxious partner may believe that the conflict reveals who they really are. A temporary communication problem then becomes evidence of a permanent personal weakness.

This pattern can be linked to the belief that love must be earned. Some people feel secure only when they are helpful, calm, attractive, or easy to satisfy. They may believe that showing anger, disappointment, or need will make the partner lose interest.

When conflict occurs, the person may think that they have broken the conditions for being loved. They may believe that the partner's silence is a reasonable response to their failure. This belief can make unfair withdrawal seem deserved.

Self-blame may also focus on physical appearance or personal attraction. The anxious partner may think that they are not attractive enough to keep the partner interested. A period of emotional distance can then lead to comparison with other people.

The person may examine photographs, clothing, body shape, age, or other parts of appearance. They may compare themselves with people the partner follows online or meets in daily life. The conflict may have little connection with appearance, but insecurity gives the silence this meaning.

The person may also question their social value. They may believe that they are not interesting, successful, confident, or independent enough. If the partner appears relaxed with friends but remains silent in the relationship, the anxious person may think that other people are easier to enjoy.

These comparisons can deepen the fear of replacement. The person may believe that the partner has many better choices. The relationship then feels unstable because personal worth is measured against imagined competitors.

Self-blame can also appear through repeated apology. The anxious partner may apologize before understanding what happened. They may accept responsibility for matters that were shared or mainly caused by the other partner. The purpose of the apology is often to restore communication rather than admit a clear mistake.

Repeated apology can provide a sense of action. The person cannot control the partner's silence, but they can offer another apology, promise to change, or

give up a personal request. These actions may feel like possible ways to bring the partner back.

The person may apologize for having emotional needs. They may say sorry for asking to talk, feeling hurt, or wanting a reply. Their real concern is then pushed aside. The cold war ends only when the anxious partner gives up the issue that caused discomfort.

This pattern weakens personal boundaries. The person learns that expressing dissatisfaction may lead to emotional withdrawal. To avoid another cold war, they may remain silent about future problems. Fear of abandonment becomes stronger than the wish to be treated fairly.

Taking full responsibility for the partner's withdrawal also hides the partner's role in the conflict. The anxious person may think that the partner would communicate well if they had behaved better. This explanation treats withdrawal as an automatic result of personal failure.

The withdrawing partner still makes a choice about how to handle conflict. Anger does not require prolonged silence, unclear punishment, or refusal to communicate. A person can ask for space and give a time for later discussion. When this does not happen, the communication problem cannot be placed on the anxious partner alone.

Self-blame may continue after the partner resumes contact. The anxious person may feel relieved and decide not to discuss the cold war. They may believe that raising the issue will cause another period of silence. The original problem remains, and the person carries more fear into the next conflict.

5.2 Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophic thinking occurs when a person moves quickly from a limited problem to the worst possible outcome. During a cold war, the anxious partner may move from silence to fear of abandonment without enough information between these two points.

A partner may stop speaking after an argument. The anxious person may soon believe that the partner wants to end the relationship. The thought can appear before the partner has mentioned separation or shown any clear plan to leave.

The person may recognize that other explanations are possible. The partner may need time, feel angry, or lack the skills to discuss conflict. The feared explanation still feels more urgent. The possibility of abandonment receives more attention because it carries the greatest emotional risk.

Catastrophic thinking often follows a fast chain. The partner does not reply. The anxious person thinks that the partner no longer cares. Loss of care becomes a possible breakup. The breakup becomes permanent loneliness. One silent period is then linked to a much larger fear about the future.

This chain may happen within a short time. Each step feels connected to the one before it, even when there is little evidence. The final outcome begins to seem likely because the person has mentally travelled through the full sequence.

The anxious partner may also view one conflict as proof that the entire relationship is failing. A disagreement about time, communication, or daily habits can become evidence that the couple is not suitable for each other. Positive parts of the relationship receive less attention.

The person may think that healthy couples do not have this type of conflict. Since the cold war has occurred, the relationship must be unhealthy or close to ending. This belief leaves little space for repair, learning, or change.

Past conflicts may be brought into the present. The person may connect several disagreements and treat them as one continuous pattern. Each earlier problem becomes evidence that the current cold war is part of a larger decline.

Some earlier conflicts may have been discussed and resolved. Under strong anxiety, they return as proof that nothing was truly repaired. The person may believe that the partner has secretly carried dissatisfaction for a long time.

Temporary emotional distance may also be seen as permanent damage. The anxious partner may think that the relationship can never return to its earlier state. A hurtful word or period of silence is treated as something that has changed the bond forever.

This expectation can create despair before the couple has tried to repair the conflict. The person may believe that trust, closeness, or attraction has already been lost. Attempts at communication may seem pointless because the damage is assumed to be complete.

Catastrophic thinking may also concern the partner's hidden intentions. The anxious person may imagine that the partner is using the cold war to prepare for departure. The partner may be thinking, making plans, or seeking advice from others about ending the relationship.

There may be no evidence of these actions. Silence makes them possible because it gives no clear information. The anxious person may treat possibility as probability and later treat probability as certainty.

The person may mentally prepare for practical losses. They may imagine losing shared friends, housing, routines, plans, or future goals. A current conflict then becomes connected with many possible changes. The emotional size of the cold war grows far beyond the original issue.

Catastrophic thinking can change behaviour. A person who believes that abandonment is close may demand an immediate answer. They may ask whether the relationship is over, threaten to leave, or insist that the partner prove commitment.

Such questions may be difficult for the withdrawing partner to answer during strong emotion. A delayed or uncertain reply can then be taken as further proof that the feared outcome is real.

The person may also try to prevent permanent damage through excessive promises. They may agree to change important parts of themselves, stop seeing certain friends, or accept unreasonable conditions. The fear of future loss reduces their ability to judge what is fair.

A short sign of warmth may lower catastrophic thinking for a while. The person may feel that the relationship is safe again. This relief can disappear after another cold reply. The mind moves back to the worst result because basic security has not been restored.

5.3 Rumination

Rumination refers to repeated thinking about the same distressing event without reaching a clear answer. During a cold war, the anxious partner may replay the conflict, examine the partner's behaviour, and imagine different outcomes. The thinking feels useful because the person is searching for certainty. It often keeps the emotional pain active.

The person may replay the conversation that came before the silence. They remember what each partner said, the order of the words, and the tone used. A small detail may be reviewed many times.

The anxious partner may ask whether a different sentence could have prevented the conflict. They may imagine giving another reply, remaining quiet, or leaving the room earlier. These imagined versions create the feeling that the cold war could have been avoided through perfect behaviour.

The person may focus on one hurtful statement. They repeat it mentally and search for its real meaning. A sentence spoken in anger may be treated as a full expression of the partner's hidden beliefs.

The context of the argument may receive less attention. The person may believe that angry words are more honest than calm ones. This makes the statement difficult to dismiss even when the partner later explains or apologizes.

Rumination also includes repeated analysis of current behaviour. The person may ask why the partner entered a room without speaking, why a message had no emoji, or why an online post appeared during the cold war. Each detail becomes a problem that needs an answer.

One explanation rarely feels enough. The person may think that the partner is angry, then wonder whether the partner has lost interest, then fear that someone else is involved. The mind moves among these answers without settling on any of them.

This repeated analysis creates more uncertainty rather than less. Every explanation introduces another possible threat. The person may begin with one unanswered question and end with many.

Rumination can also take the form of imagined conversations. The person may plan what to say when communication resumes. They prepare

explanations, apologies, questions, and responses to possible criticism.

This planning may continue for a long time because the actual conversation has not happened. The person tries to prepare for every possible reaction. Each imagined negative reply creates a new need for preparation.

Some imagined conversations end in repair. Others end in rejection or breakup. The person may feel temporary comfort when imagining a good outcome and strong fear when imagining a bad one. Emotional changes occur even though no real interaction has taken place.

It can become difficult to shift attention away from the relationship. Work may take longer because the person repeatedly checks messages or returns to the conflict in thought. Reading, studying, and other tasks may feel hard because the mind remains focused on possible rejection.

Social contact may also be affected. The person may talk about the conflict repeatedly with friends. They may ask others to interpret the partner's messages or behaviour. Each opinion creates another explanation to consider.

Support from friends can be helpful, but repeated discussion may keep the conflict active. The person may seek a clear answer that friends cannot provide. Different opinions can increase confusion rather than reduce it.

Rumination often becomes stronger at night. There are fewer tasks to distract attention, and the person may expect a message before sleeping. The silence feels more noticeable when the day ends without contact.

The person may remain awake reviewing the conflict or checking the phone. Poor sleep then reduces emotional control the next day. Fear, anger, and sadness become harder to manage when the body is tired.

The anxious partner may know that repeated thinking is causing pain but still find it difficult to stop. Ending the analysis can feel like giving up control. The person may fear that an important clue will be missed or that they will be unprepared for the partner's next action.

Rumination gives the impression of active problem-solving. Real problem-solving requires new information, a clear goal, and possible action. Repeated thinking during a cold war often uses the same limited information. The thoughts continue because no new answer is available.

The process can strengthen negative memory. Each time the conflict is replayed, its emotional effect may return. The person experiences the hurt many times instead of only once. The event becomes easier to recall and more closely linked with fear.

Later conflicts may activate the same memories. A new period of silence can bring back earlier cold wars in detail. The current situation then carries the emotional weight of several past events.

5.4 Emotional Reactions

Anxiety is the most direct emotional reaction to possible rejection. The person feels unsure about the partner's intentions and cannot predict what will happen next. This uncertainty may produce mental and physical tension.

The anxious partner may feel restless and unable to remain still. The person may check the phone, walk around, or have difficulty completing ordinary tasks. The body may react through a fast heartbeat, chest tightness, stomach discomfort, shaking, or changes in appetite.

The person may become highly alert to any sound or notification. A message tone can create immediate hope and fear. When the message is not from the partner, disappointment follows.

Anxiety may rise and fall according to small signs. A brief reply can create relief. A cold tone or another delay can bring the fear back. The person's emotional state becomes closely tied to the partner's communication.

Anger can appear together with anxiety. The person may feel ignored, disrespected, or punished. They may believe that the partner has control over the situation because only the partner can decide when communication will resume.

This lack of control can make anger stronger. The anxious partner may feel that their emotional pain is

visible but is being ignored on purpose. Silence then seems cruel rather than simply avoidant.

Anger may be expressed through repeated messages, accusations, sarcasm, or emotional outbursts. The person may say things that are meant to force a response. Even a negative reply can feel better than continued silence because it confirms that the partner is still engaged.

Some angry behaviour has a protest function. The person is not only trying to hurt the partner. They are trying to make the partner notice the relationship and restore contact. The behaviour may look rejecting while its hidden purpose is to regain closeness.

This expression can create a new problem. The withdrawing partner may focus on the anger and ignore the fear beneath it. The person may then withdraw further, which increases both anger and anxiety.

Sadness often appears when the person experiences emotional distance as loss. The relationship has not formally ended, but the usual warmth is absent. The anxious partner may feel that something important has already been taken away.

Daily reminders can increase sadness. An empty seat, an unanswered message, or a broken routine may show the absence of normal closeness. The person may miss the partner even when they are physically nearby.

Sadness may lead to crying, low energy, poor concentration, or loss of interest in other activities. The person may stop enjoying time with friends because attention remains on the damaged connection.

Hope can make sadness unstable. A small sign of care may improve the person's mood quickly. When the sign is followed by more distance, sadness returns. This repeated rise and fall can be tiring.

Shame develops when the person links the conflict with personal weakness. The anxious partner may feel embarrassed about needing reassurance or sending many messages. They may judge themselves for reacting strongly.

The person may believe that a confident or mature partner would not feel this upset. Emotional need is then treated as a personal defect. The person experiences anxiety and also feels ashamed of having anxiety.

Shame may increase after an emotional outburst. Once the person calms down, they may regret the messages, calls, accusations, or threats made during the cold war. They may fear that this behaviour has made the partner even more likely to leave.

This fear can produce more apology and self-blame. The person may try to repair both the original conflict and the later emotional reaction. The number of problems seems to grow.

The person may hide the situation from friends because they feel embarrassed about being ignored. They may also hide their own behaviour because they fear being judged as dependent or unstable. This reduces access to support.

Helplessness appears when the person believes that nothing they do can restore safety. Messages receive no answer, apologies do not end the silence, and waiting does not provide information. The person feels unable to influence the relationship.

This state can be painful because the partner remains the expected source of relief. The anxious person may believe that only a reply, call, or sign of affection can stop the distress. Personal methods of calming down seem weak compared with direct reassurance.

Repeated failed attempts at contact can deepen helplessness. The person may feel trapped between acting and waiting. Sending another message may create regret, while remaining silent may feel impossible.

Helplessness can lead to emotional surrender. The person may accept all blame, give up personal needs, or agree to any condition that restores contact. The main aim is to end the uncertainty.

It can also lead to sudden withdrawal. After trying repeatedly to gain a response, the anxious partner may stop communicating and act as if they no longer care. This change may appear calm, but it can reflect exhaustion rather than real emotional distance.

Anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, and helplessness rarely appear separately. The person may move among them within a short period. Fear of loss can

become anger at being ignored. Anger can be followed by shame. Continued silence may then produce sadness and helplessness.

These emotional changes affect how the person interprets later events. Anger makes neutral actions seem disrespectful. Shame supports self-blame. Sadness makes the future look hopeless. Helplessness makes the partner's response seem like the only possible source of safety.

6. Hyperactivation of the Attachment System

The attachment system activates when a relationship feels unsafe. It pushes the person to seek closeness and support. In a stable relationship, simple contact can reduce fear.

During a cold war, contact is limited. The partner may stay silent or avoid discussion. The anxious person cannot confirm if the relationship is safe. The system stays active for longer.

The person tries harder to restore closeness. They may send many messages, ask repeated questions, or demand quick replies. They may also show anger or make accusations. These actions come from fear of loss.

Attention becomes fixed on the partner. Mood, sleep, and daily tasks depend on the partner's response. The person may know their behavior is not helpful but still feel unable to stop.

6.1 Strong Reassurance-Seeking

Reassurance-seeking means trying to confirm that the partner still cares. During a cold war, this need becomes frequent. The person may send many messages. Each message tries to fix uncertainty. New worries appear after each message, which leads to more messages. Messages may change in tone. Some are calm, others angry or apologetic. These shifts reflect unstable emotions. The person may promise to stop but contact the partner again soon. Silence feels too hard to tolerate. Unanswered messages increase the feeling of rejection. The person may think their pain is ignored. Some messages become very long. The person explains everything in detail to avoid misunderstanding. This can feel overwhelming to the partner and lead to more silence. Repeated calls serve the same purpose. The person wants quick reassurance. Missed calls increase urgency. Direct questions are common, such as asking if the partner still cares. Even after receiving answers, doubt returns. The person may focus on small changes in tone. A colder reply can increase fear. They may also ask indirect questions or compare themselves to others. These questions reflect fear of losing value. The person often wants immediate answers. Delay feels dangerous. They may set deadlines or threaten to leave to force a reply. Reassurance brings quick relief, but it does not last. The cycle repeats if the conflict remains.

6.2 Protest Behaviour

Protest behavior aims to get attention when direct attempts fail. It may look hostile but comes from fear. Accusations are common. The person may say the partner does not care or wants to leave. These claims often lack clear evidence. Accusations can force a response. Even conflict feels better than silence. The person may bring up past issues. The focus shifts away from the original problem. Emotional outbursts may happen after long frustration. The person may cry, shout, or send angry messages. This can trigger a response but often leads to regret. Threats of separation are another form. The person may say they will leave to test the partner's reaction. This can backfire if the partner takes it seriously. Some actions make loss visible, such as removing photos or blocking the partner. These acts aim to provoke a response. Jealousy can also be used. The person may mention others or post content to attract attention. If the partner reacts, it brings short relief. If not, fear increases. Silence can also be used as protest. The person stops contacting but still watches closely for a response. Both partners may wait, which prolongs the cold war.

6.3 Overdependence on the Partner's Response

The person's mood becomes tied to the partner's behavior. A message can quickly improve mood. Silence can cause distress. Message frequency

becomes a sign of safety. Frequent replies mean care. Delays mean rejection. Daily life is affected. The person checks the phone often and struggles to focus on tasks. Work and study may suffer. Attention shifts back to the partner again and again. Social life becomes less important. The person may avoid activities to stay available for contact. Sleep is often disturbed. The person may stay awake waiting for a message or wake up to check the phone.

Eating habits may change. Some lose appetite, others eat more. The partner becomes the main source of emotional stability. Other coping methods feel less effective. The person may stop trusting their own judgment. They rely on the partner to feel secure. Even negative contact can feel better than silence. The need for any response becomes strong.

6.4 Reduced Self-Regulation

Self-regulation weakens during a cold war. The person struggles to manage emotions alone. Distraction does not work well. Attention returns to the partner quickly. Support from others may feel unhelpful. The person believes only the partner can provide answers. Calming methods give short relief. The person may stop using them. Impulsive actions become common. Messages are sent without thinking. Later, the person may regret them. The person may send multiple versions of the same message or delete and rewrite them. Social media may be used to express feelings or gain attention. These actions can create more stress later. The person may try different ways to contact the partner, including calls, emails, or other accounts. They may go to places where the partner is likely to be. This can create new conflict. The person feels that delay increases risk. Immediate contact seems necessary. Waiting feels unsafe. The person fears the partner will move on. This urgency leads to poor timing. Conversations may happen when the partner is not ready. Emotions quickly turn into actions. There is little pause between feeling and behavior. Over time, this pattern becomes automatic. Even small signs of distance can trigger strong reactions.

7. The Interaction Cycle between Anxiety and Withdrawal

Attachment anxiety in a cold war is shaped by both partners' responses. One seeks closeness to feel safe, while the other seeks distance to reduce pressure. These opposing needs create a cycle where pursuit increases withdrawal, and withdrawal increases anxiety.

7.1 The Anxious Partner's Pursuit

Pursuit involves repeated attempts to gain contact, reassurance, or explanation. It may include frequent questions, messages, calls, or emotional appeals. The anxious partner believes that restoring contact will reduce distress.

Questions often escalate when answers are unclear or absent, shifting from practical concerns to deeper fears about love or separation. Even when the partner responds, the anxious person may feel unsatisfied if the reply lacks warmth or clarity.

As anxiety grows, demands may become stronger, including requests for immediate replies, emotional reassurance, or physical closeness. These behaviors aim to restore security but may feel overwhelming to the other partner.

Pursuit can intensify over time, especially if persistence has previously led to a response. It may also shift from calm requests to criticism, anger, or guilt, which can further push the partner away.

7.2 The Withdrawing Partner's Avoidance

Withdrawal often begins as a way to reduce emotional pressure or avoid conflict. The partner may need time to process feelings or fear making the situation worse.

Problems arise when withdrawal lacks clear communication or time limits. Silence leaves the anxious partner uncertain and increases insecurity.

Repeated questions and emotional demands can feel overwhelming, leading the withdrawing partner to reduce communication further. Silence, avoidance, or delayed responses become ways to regain control.

Withdrawal may also reflect discomfort with emotional discussion, fear of conflict, or a desire to

protect independence. In some cases, silence can carry anger or act as a form of indirect control.

Over time, avoidance can become habitual, making communication harder and increasing emotional distance.

7.3 The Pursuit-Withdrawal Cycle

The cycle begins when one partner seeks reassurance and the other responds with distance. Each reaction reinforces the other: pursuit feels like pressure, and withdrawal feels like rejection.

Both partners often blame each other—one for not responding, the other for being too demanding—while missing how their behaviors are connected.

The original issue may be replaced by conflict about communication itself. Repeated cycles strengthen expectations: the anxious partner anticipates silence, and the withdrawing partner anticipates pressure.

Over time, trust decreases, reactions become faster and stronger, and the pattern spreads to other areas of the relationship. Conflicts may end without real resolution, leaving both partners more sensitive and less secure in future interactions.

8. Factors That Strengthen Attachment Anxiety

People respond differently during relational cold wars, and these differences are shaped by personal experiences, self-worth, communication styles, and power dynamics within the relationship. When an individual is highly dependent on the relationship but lacks control over communication, attachment anxiety is more likely to intensify. Missing information, past trauma, digital interaction cues, low self-esteem, and weak support systems can all make a partner's response the sole source of emotional security.

8.1 Unequal Emotional Investment

When one partner places the relationship at the center of their life while the other is more comfortable with distance, imbalance during a cold war can heighten anxiety. The more invested partner not only fears the breakdown of communication but also worries about the collapse of future plans, identity, and emotional belonging. They may be more likely to compromise, apologize, or tolerate unfair behavior to preserve the relationship. Meanwhile, the less dependent partner may unintentionally gain more control through silence, leaving the anxious partner in a passive waiting position and reinforcing feelings of helplessness.

8.2 Poor Conflict Communication

A lack of clear communication forces anxious individuals to fill in informational gaps with worst-case interpretations. Vague expressions, avoidance of explanation, or the use of silence make problems harder to understand and resolve. Without clear time limits or emotional boundaries, waiting becomes indefinite, allowing anxiety to accumulate. The use of absolute language or threats of breakup further weakens the sense of security, making each conflict feel like it could end the relationship.

8.3 Past Relationship Trauma

Individuals who have experienced betrayal, sudden breakups, or emotional neglect are more likely to associate current silence with past pain. Delayed responses or behavioral changes may be interpreted as signs of hidden problems or impending abandonment. Trauma increases the need for reassurance, such as frequent checking or constant contact, which may be perceived by the partner as distrust, potentially triggering new conflicts.

8.4 Impact of Digital Communication

Online status indicators, read receipts, and social media activity provide abundant details that can be interpreted during a cold war. Anxious individuals may repeatedly check these signals, viewing delays or lack of response as intentional. A partner's activity on social platforms may be seen as indifference toward the relationship, intensifying insecurity. The digital environment amplifies uncertainty and keeps the cold war constantly present in one's attention.

8.5 Low Self-Esteem and Weak Support Systems

Low self-esteem leads individuals to rely on the relationship as a primary source of self-worth, making a partner's silence feel like a reflection of personal inadequacy. When there is a lack of support from friends or family, the relationship becomes the sole emotional anchor, increasing the impact of a cold war. Without external perspectives, individuals are more likely to fall into cycles of rumination and self-blame, further deepening attachment anxiety.

9. Reducing Attachment Anxiety during Cold Wars

Attachment anxiety cannot be reduced simply by telling the anxious partner to worry less. It is shaped by how both partners handle conflict. Clear communication reduces uncertainty, while emotional regulation prevents fear from turning into impulsive behaviour (Gross, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Couples need to distinguish temporary distance from rejection and create rules that protect the relationship during conflict.

After an argument, a partner may need time alone, but this should be stated clearly. Explaining that the pause is for emotional regulation, not rejection, helps reduce anxiety. The couple should also agree on when communication will resume. For example, a partner may say they need a few hours and will talk later. If more time is needed, a brief update should be given. Silence should not be used as punishment. Ignoring the partner until they apologize or give in creates fear and imbalance. A cooling-off period should support communication, not control. Even during a pause, basic respect and minimal contact should be maintained.

Anxious individuals often confuse facts with assumptions. A delayed reply is a fact, but believing it means loss of love is an interpretation. Writing down facts and possible explanations can reduce negative thinking. Silence may result from stress, fatigue, or a need for space, not necessarily rejection. Catastrophic thinking should be avoided. One conflict does not mean the relationship will end. Self-blame also needs correction. Conflict involves both partners, and wanting respectful communication is not a personal failure.

Strong emotions can lead to repeated messages, accusations, or threats, which often worsen distance. Delaying responses allows time to think clearly. Writing messages without sending them immediately can help remove blame and express needs more calmly. Physical methods such as breathing, walking, or exercise can reduce stress. Maintaining regular routines like sleep and meals also helps stabilize emotions. Limiting phone checking and seeking support from trusted friends can prevent overfocus on the conflict.

A secure sense of self does not rely entirely on a partner's reassurance. Temporary distance should not define personal worth. Instead of repeated reassurance-seeking, the anxious partner can express needs directly and clearly. Maintaining friendships, interests, and personal goals provides emotional balance. Confidence also involves setting boundaries. Fear of abandonment should not lead to accepting harmful behaviour. When individuals can manage their emotions independently, they gain more control over their reactions.

Couples should agree on rules before conflicts arise. Disappearance without explanation should not be accepted. If space is needed, it should be communicated with a clear time frame. Threats of separation and insults should be avoided. Cooling-off periods should have limits, and discussions should resume when both partners are calm. Ignoring issues may create temporary peace but leads to repeated conflict. Healthy rules balance both needs: the need for space and the need for reassurance that the relationship remains secure.

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