

VICIOUS CYCLE PATTERNS IN RELATIONSHIPS

**HOW WE GET CAUGHT UP IN THEM,
AND HOW WE CAN BREAK FREE FROM THEM**

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I recall a cartoon in an intro psychology text many years ago. In it, two lab rats are returned to their cage from their sessions in “Skinner boxes,” a device that trains them to press a lever by reinforcing them with food pellets. One rat says to the other, “Boy, I really have this guy trained. Every time I press this lever, he drops this chunk of food in this trough.”

While I don't recall the context or the point the cartoon was used to illustrate, I will provide my own:

- Cause and effect is not always a one-way street, and usually it is a back-and-forth interaction

We used to acknowledge the two-way interaction in the practice of psychotherapy:

- Patients' reactions to the therapists were called transference, and therapists' reactions to their patients were called countertransference

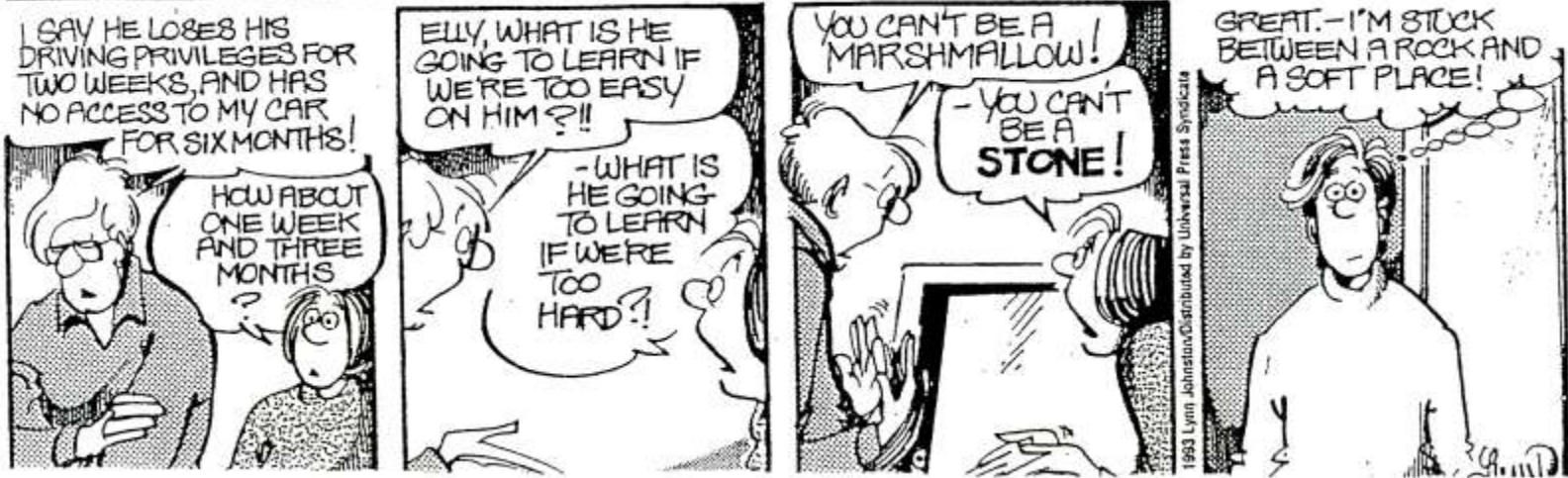
This two-way street has largely been disregarded recently

- To demonstrate the efficacy of a particular therapeutic approach to qualify it as an "evidence-based practice," therapists typically follow a protocol to assure that they are indeed using that technique.
- Studies either attempt to control "background noise," such as idiosyncratic therapist responses (e.g., countertransference), or they ignore it, so as to maintain an air of objectivity.
- Some therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive behaviorism, emphasize rationality and objectivity, perhaps assuming that this outlook provides sufficient protection against subjective biases such that they do not require attention.

The Critic – Victim – Rescuer Cycle

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

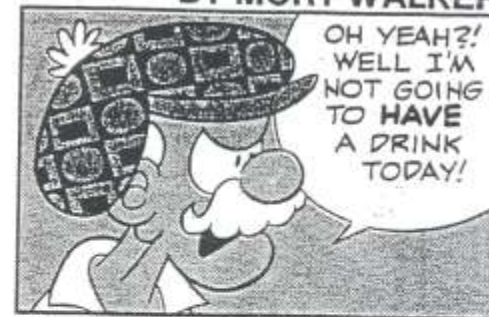
Lynn Johnston



BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



THE CRITIC – VICTIM/REBEL CYCLE PATTERN

(AKA THE PERFECTIONIST – PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE CYCLE)

THE **CRITIC** FEELS DISREGARDED, YET RESPONSIBLE, NEEDS ORDER TO FEEL SECURE, EXPERIENCES PRESSURE TO MEET STANDARDS, WORRIES, FEELS ANGRY & RESENTFUL OVER THE VICTIM/REBEL'S CHARACTER FLAWS

THE **CRITIC** PRESENTS A LIST OF CHORES, HAS EXACTING DEMANDS, COMPLAINS AND BERATES THE VICTIM/REBEL

THE **VICTIM/REBEL** FEELS BADGERED & PRESSURED, INEPT & INADEQUATE, ANNOYED BY THE DEMANDS, ANGRY THAT HE CAN NEVER PLEASE HIS PARTNER

THE **VICTIM/REBEL** "FORGETS" PROCRASTINATES ON CHORES OR PERFORMS THEM HALF-HEARTEDLY, IS OBLIVIOUS TO OTHERS' NEEDS, MAKES EXCUSES

THE SLACKER – ENABLER CYCLE

(Note that this is similar to the critic – victim/rebel cycle, except that the slacker lacks the distress of the victim, as the enabler coddles whereas the critic blames.)

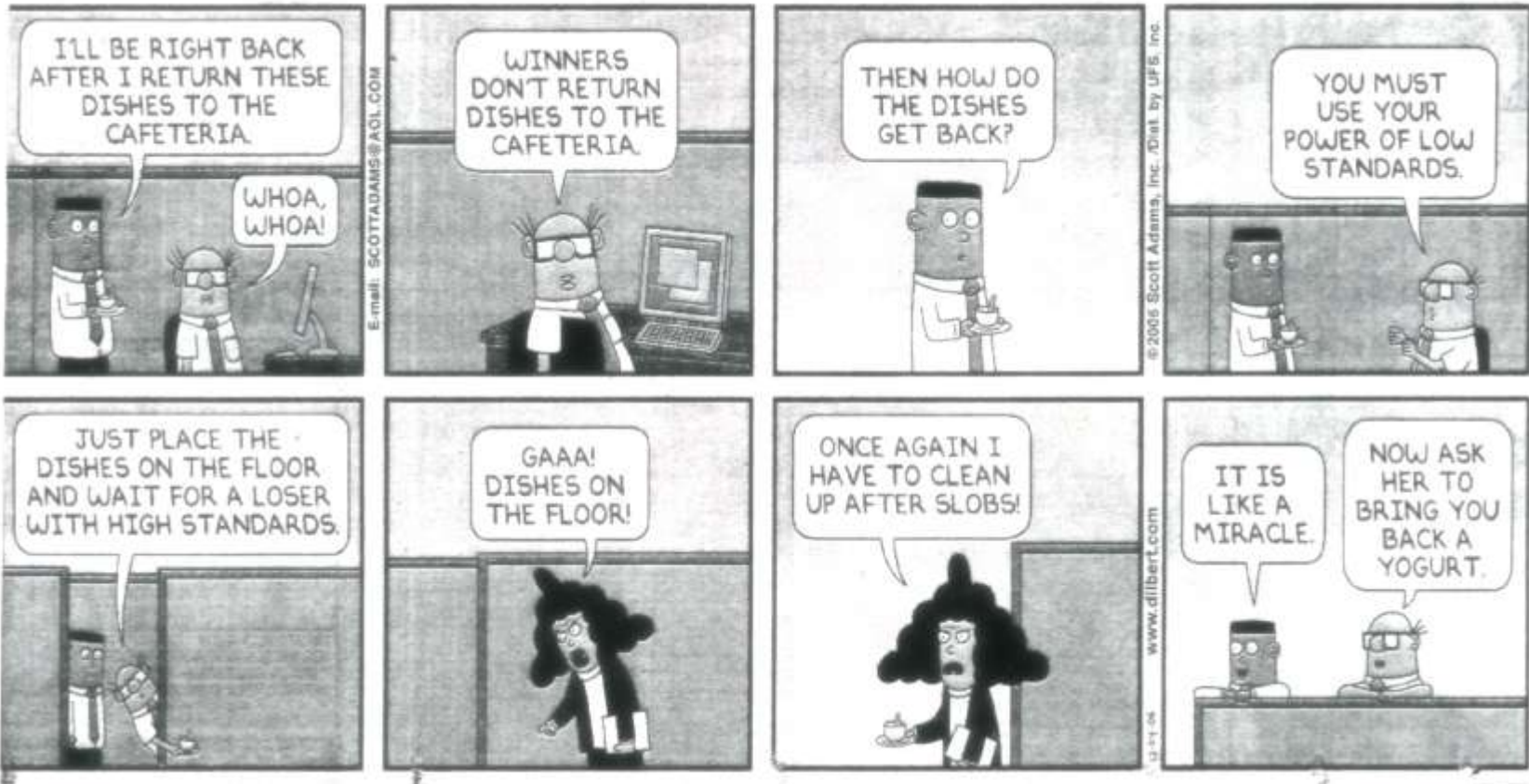
THE SLACKER FEELS
GENERALLY ENTITLED,
CAREFREE, & SELF-
INDULGENT, TAKES
SUPPORT FOR
GRANTED, BUT WITH
AN OCCASIONAL
TWINGE OF GUILT OR
SHAME WHEN CALLED
OUT

THE SLACKER DOES WHAT HE
WANTS WITH LIMITED CONCERN
FOR CONSEQUENCES, HANDLES
RESPONSIBILITIES IF & WHEN HE
FEELS LIKE IT

THE ENABLER
WORRIES AND FEELS
RESPONSIBLE FOR
THE SLACKER, FEELS
OVERWHELMED
AND AT TIMES
RESENTFUL OVER
HAVING TO DO
EVERYTHING
ONESELF

THE ENABLER MAKES
EXCUSES FOR THE SLACKER,
DOES HIS WORK FOR HIM,
& BAILS HIM OUT OF
TROUBLE, WHEN POSSIBLE

EXAMPLES OF SLACKER – ENABLER AND PERFECTIONIST – PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE INTERACTION PATTERNS



EXAMPLES OF SLACKER – ENABLER AND PERFECTIONIST – PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE INTERACTION PATTERNS

pickles | Brian Crane

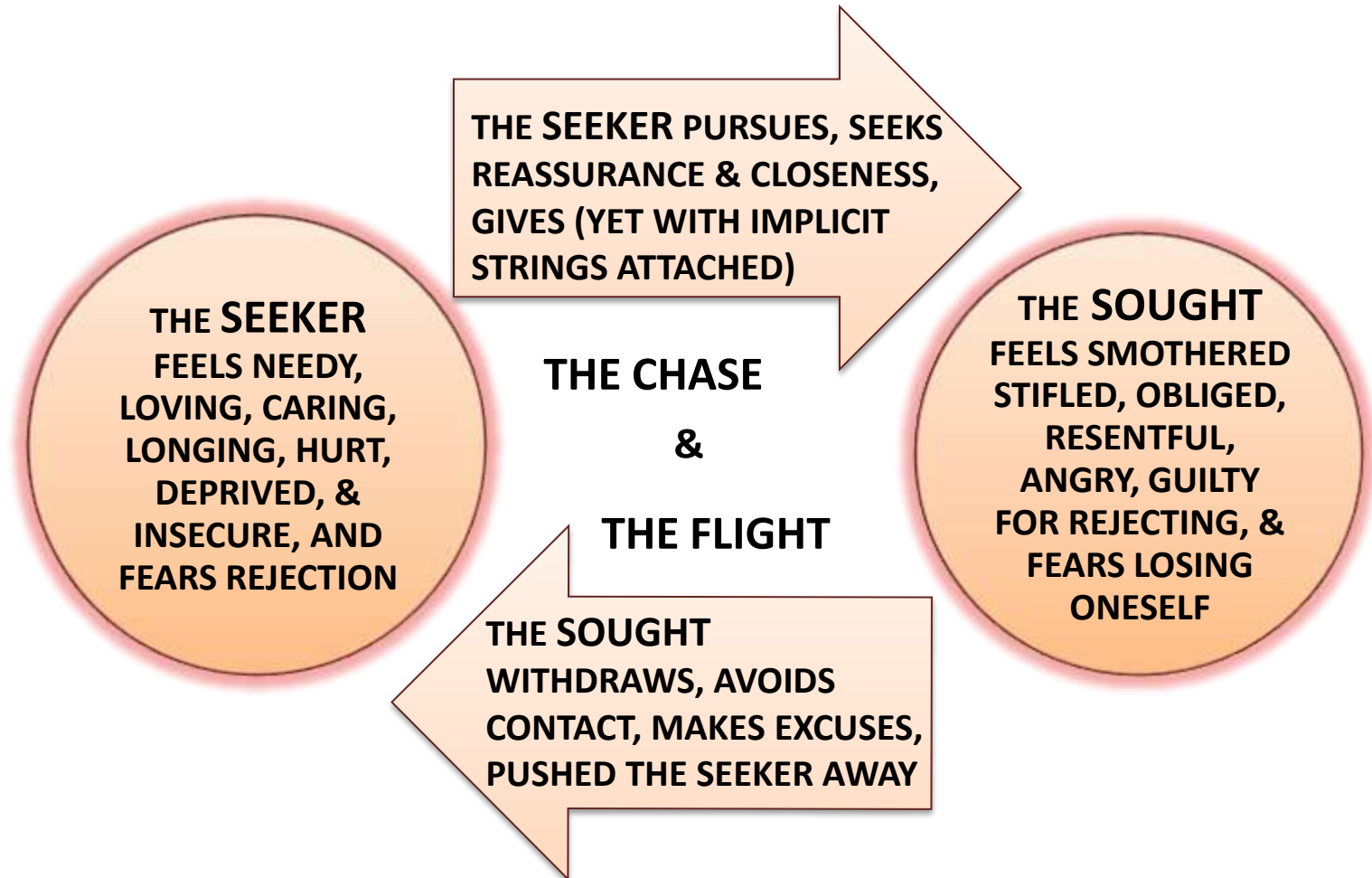


BABY BLUES by Jerry Scott & Rick Kirkman



THE CHASE – FLIGHT CYCLE

(Adapted from *The Two-Step: The Dance Toward Intimacy*,
by Eileen McCann and Douglas Shannon)

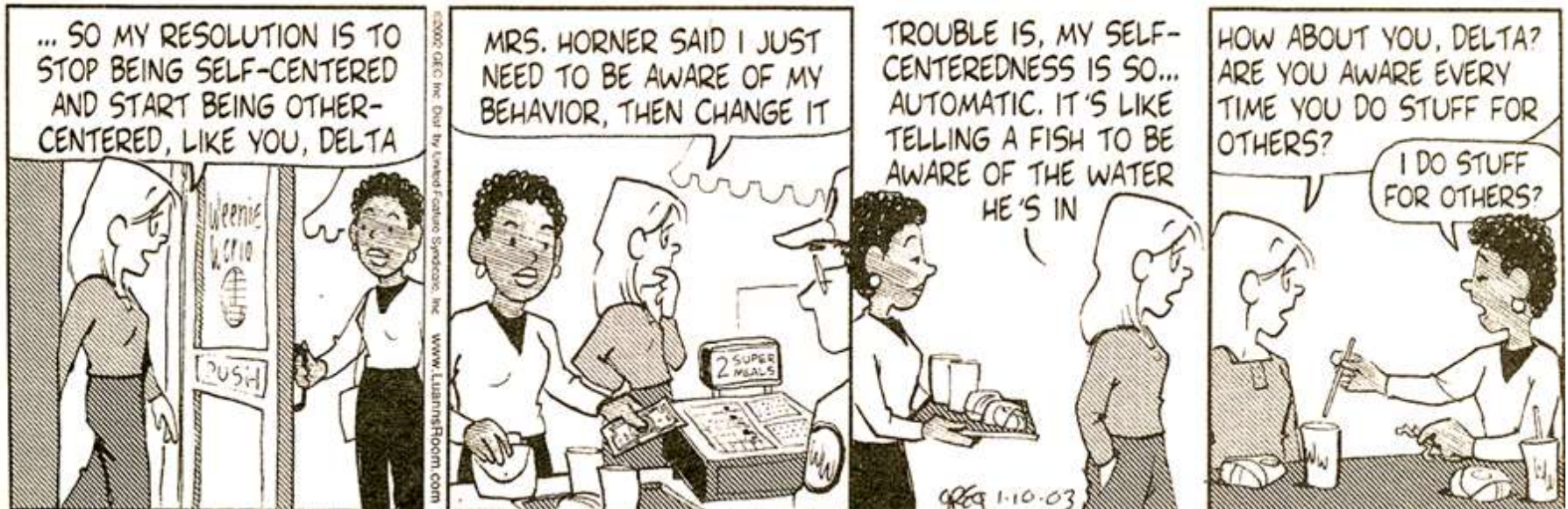


HOW TO BREAK THE VICIOUS CYCLE

Defining the vicious cycle is difficult when you are part of the pattern. It's hard enough to "see the forest for the trees," but even harder when you are one of the trees.

By the same token, it is usually much easier to see the problems with others than it is to see one's own contribution to the mess.

LUANN by Greg Evans



**God grant me
the serenity to accept the people I cannot change,
the courage to change the person I can,
and the wisdom to know that person is me.**

Just as it is easier to recognize faults in others than it is to see our own, it also is quite common to want to change our partners, rather than ourselves, in our vicious cycle relationships.

Complementary roles get caught up in vicious cycle patterns, much like the hooks and loops of Velcro entangle to fasten together.

Efforts to reform the other are most always unsuccessful.

We have the best chance of disentangle ourselves from the vicious cycle patterns by changing ourselves, transforming our loops into Teflon, so that the other's hooks cannot snag us.

DON'T TRY TO MAKE OVER THE OTHER PERSON!



But that doesn't mean that you can't ask them to change their behavior toward you.

Trying to make them over is disrespecting their autonomy, while asking for what you want is simply being assertive.

The paradox of influence: influence works best when you give up the illusion of control (i.e., That you can make someone else change).

EXAMINE OUR EXPRESSION

- **DOES OUR EXPRESSION (the content of the arrow) ACCURATELY REFLECT OUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (the content of the circle)?**
- **Or are we engaging in defensive selectivity?**
- **Mottos of various vicious cycle roles:**
 - **THE CRITIC: “better mad than sad.” Don’t let them see you sweat, especially not tears. Don’t appear weak.**
 - **The victim: “better sad than mad.” Don’t get anyone upset with you.**
 - **The rescuer: “put others first.” Don’t be selfish.**
- **Broaden our expression to reflect all our feelings.**

Embrace Conflict

- **Realize that conflict is an inherent part of life.**
- **Embrace conflict. Life without it would be utterly boring. When is the last time you went to a movie or read a novel which did not involve conflict, whether internal or interpersonal?**
- **Internal conflict is the impetus for stopping to reflect on our options, thus allowing us to make choices.**
- **Interpersonal conflict provides the means by which we balance our individuality with our connection to others, by asserting our needs and wants in the face of opposition and by sacrificing our wishes for the sake of the people we care about.**