

Aftermath of a Fight

HOW TO REPAIR AFTER A FIGHT OR
REGRETTABLE INCIDENT

Tools for an Effective Repair Conversation



The Gottman Institute

Aftermath of a Fight

This booklet is for “processing” past fights, regrettable incidents or past emotional injuries.

“Processing” means that you can talk about the incident without getting back into it again. It needs to be a conversation – as if you were both sitting in the balcony of a theater looking down on the stage where the action had occurred. This requires calm and some emotional distance from the incident.

Before you begin

Keep in mind the **GOAL** is greater understanding — addressing the process and **how** the issue was talked about, without getting back into the fight. So, wait until you’re both calm.

We assume that **each** of your realities has validity. Perception is everything. Don’t focus on “the facts.”

Pay attention to the common barriers to communication and their antidotes as you move through the process. The “Four Horsemen” reference on the last page of this booklet can help.

THE FIVE STEPS

Work through the following five steps together

1. **Feelings:**
Share how you felt. Do not say why you felt that way. Avoid commenting on your partner's feelings.
2. **Realities:**
Describe your "reality." Take turns. Summarize and validate at least a part of your partner's reality.
3. **Triggers:**
Share what experiences or memories you've had that might have escalated the interaction, and the stories of why these are triggers for each of you.
4. **Responsibility:**
Acknowledge your own role in contributing to the fight or regrettable incident.
5. **Constructive Plans:**
Plan together one way that each of you can make it better next time.

STEP 1 FEELINGS

Share how you felt, but not why yet. **Aloud.**

I felt:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Defensive | 19. Out of control | 37. I wanted to win |
| 2. Not listened to | 20. Frustrated | 38. My opinions didn't even matter |
| 3. Feelings got hurt | 21. Righteously indignant | 39. There was a lot of give and take |
| 4. Totally flooded | 22. Morally justified | 40. I had no feelings at all |
| 5. Angry | 23. Unfairly picked on | 41. I had no idea what I was feeling |
| 6. Sad | 24. Unappreciated | 42. Lonely |
| 7. Unloved | 25. Disliked | 43. Alienated |
| 8. Misunderstood | 26. Unattractive | 44. Ashamed |
| 9. Criticized | 27. Stupid | 45. Guilty |
| 10. Took a complaint personally | 28. Morally outraged | 46. Culpable |
| 11. Like you didn't even like me | 29. Taken for granted | 47. Abandoned |
| 12. Not cared about | 30. Like leaving | 48. Disloyal |
| 13. Worried | 31. Like staying and talking this through | 49. Exhausted |
| 14. Afraid | 32. Overwhelmed with emotion | 50. Foolish |
| 15. Unsafe | 33. Not calm | 51. Overwhelmed |
| 16. Tense | 34. Stubborn | 52. Remorseful |
| 17. I was right and you were wrong | 35. Powerless | 53. Shocked |
| 18. Both of us were partly right | 36. I had no influence | 54. Tired |

STEP 2 REALITIES

Subjective Reality and Validation

1. Take turns describing your perceptions, your own reality of what happened during the regrettable incident. Describe only what YOU saw, heard and felt, not what you think your partner meant or felt. Avoid attack and blame. Talk about what you might have needed from your partner. Describe your perceptions like a reporter, giving an objective moment-by-moment description. Say “I heard you say,” rather than, “You said.” This leaves room for your partner to correct anything misheard or misunderstood.
2. Summarize and then validate your partner’s reality by saying something like, “It makes sense to me now why you saw it this way, and what your needs were.” Use empathy by saying something like, “I can see why this upset you.” Validation doesn’t mean you agree, but that you can understand even a part of your partner’s experience of the incident.
3. Do both partners feel understood? If yes, move on. If no, ask, “What do I need to know to understand your perspective better?” After summarizing and validating, ask your partner, “Did I get it?” and “Is there anything else?”

STEP 3 TRIGGERS

1. Share what escalated the interaction for you. What events in the interaction triggered a big reaction in you?
2. As you rewind the video tape of your memory, stop at a point where you had a similar set of feelings triggered in the past. Now, tell the story of that past moment to your partner, so your partner can understand why that is a trigger for you.
3. Continue to share your stories—it will help your partner to understand you. As you think about your early history or childhood, is there another story you remember that relates to what got triggered in you, your “enduring vulnerabilities?” Your partner needs to know you, so that your partner can be more sensitive to you.

Examples of Triggers:

1. I felt judged. I'm very sensitive to that.
2. I felt excluded. I'm very sensitive to that.
3. I felt criticized. I'm very sensitive to that.
4. I felt flooded.
5. I felt ashamed.
6. I felt lonely.
7. I felt belittled.
8. I felt disrespected.
9. I felt powerless.
10. I felt out of control.
11. Other:

Validation

Does any part of your partner's triggers and story make sense to you?

STEP 4 TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Under ideal conditions, you might have done better at talking about this issue.

What set you up for the miscommunication? What was your state of mind?

Share how you set yourself up to get into this conflict:

What set me up:

1. I'd been very stressed and irritable.
2. I'd not expressed much appreciation toward you.
3. I'd taken you for granted.
4. I'd been overly sensitive.
5. I'd been overly critical.
6. I'd not shared very much of my inner world.
7. I'd not been emotionally available.
8. I'd been turning away more.
9. I'd been getting easily upset.
10. I'd been depressed.
11. I'd had a chip on my shoulder.
12. I'd not been very affectionate.
13. I'd not made time for good things between us.
14. I'd not been a very good listener.
15. I'd not asked for what I needed.

16. I'd been feeling a bit like a martyr.
17. I'd needed to be alone.
18. I'd not wanted to take care of anybody.
19. I'd been very preoccupied.
20. I hadn't felt very much confidence in myself.
21. I'd been running on empty.

Read aloud the items that were true for you on this list.

Specifically what do you regret, and specifically, what was your contribution to this regrettable incident or fight?

What do you wish to apologize for?

I'm sorry that:

1. I over-reacted.
2. I was really grumpy.
3. I was defensive.
4. I was so negative.
5. I attacked you.
6. I didn't listen to you.
7. I wasn't respectful.
8. I was unreasonable.
9. _____

If you accept your partner's apology, say so. If not, say what you still need.

STEP 5 CONSTRUCTIVE PLANS

What is one thing your partner can do differently to avoid an incident like this from happening again? Share one thing your partner can do to make a discussion of this issue better next time.

Then, while it's still your turn, share one thing you can do to make it better next time.

What do you need to be able to put this behind you and move on? Be as agreeable as possible to the plans suggested by your partner.

Stop the Four Horsemen with their Antidotes

CRITICISM



Use Gentle
Start Up

DEFENSIVENESS



Take
Responsibility

CONTEMPT



Describe Your Own
Feelings and Needs
Don't Describe Your Partner

STONEWALLING



Do Physiological
Self-Soothing

Aftermath of a Fight

OTHER GOTTMAN RELATIONSHIP GUIDES:

Fondness & Admiration

Avoid The Four Horsemen

Relaxation

Small Things Often

How to be a Great Listener

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