

This guide is intended to be psychoeducational.

If you would like a full evaluation of your relationship, you can find a Gottman-trained therapist in your area at gottmanreferralnetwork.com

A Better Way to *Fight*:

WHAT TO DO DURING EVERY STAGE OF A
DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Before

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Use this early and often when conflict arises.

John Gottman says, “94% of the time, the way a discussion starts determines the way it will end.”

Use a Softened Start-Up

Start the conversation off right. This means coming from a place of **understanding**, and wanting your **partner to understand you**... not from a place of anger or accusations.

To soften your start-up means to approach a conversation with **how you're feeling** about the situation, not your perception of your partner's flaws or behavior.

A GOOD FORMULA TO REMEMBER IS:

1

“I feel _____,”

- hurt
- abandoned
- attacked
- left out
- etc.

2

“about _____,”

*[the specific behavior,
not a pattern of behavior]*

- “when I’m not invited to virtual happy hours with your friends,”
- “when you don’t read the articles I send you,”
- “when we don’t have dinner together,”

3

“and I need _____.”

[state the positive need]

- “to know what your preferred evening schedule looks like and how I can be a part of it.”
- “to feel like you’re interested in the things I care about.”
- “to spend some quality time together this week.”

Be polite and appreciative. Just because you are in conflict with your partner doesn't mean that your respect and affection for them has to diminish. Adding phrases such as “please” and “I appreciate it” can be helpful for maintaining respect and emotional connection during a difficult conversation.

During

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

John Gottman says, “94% of the time, the way a discussion starts determines the way it will end.”

Adopt the Team Mentality

If you feel like you’re always fighting against each other, and not for a common goal, you may need to practice the team mentality.

Instead of becoming hyper-focused on your partner's flaws or mistakes, adopt a team mindset to shift the perspective from blame to cooperation. By recognizing that you and your partner are on the same side, working towards shared objectives, you can foster an environment of mutual support and understanding. When challenges arise, you'll approach them as a united front, seeking solutions together rather than engaging in the blame game.

REMIND YOURSELF DURING AN ARGUMENT:

1. When you want to blame, remember that you and your partner are on the same team.
2. Rather than assuming negative intentions, practice open and non-judgmental dialogue.
3. **Actively listen to your partner's perspective, validate their feelings, and express empathy.**

Self-Soothe if You Need to

Ever feel overwhelmed during an argument? You may be feeling flooded. Flooding is a sensation of feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed during conflict, making it impossible to have a productive conversation.

When emotions start to take over or you stop - “Hearing and understanding each other”

SO HOW CAN YOU OVERCOME OVERWHELM?

SELF-SOOTHING IS THE ANSWER.

1

Communicate

to your partner that you’re going to take a short break from the conflict.

2

Practice doing an activity that calms you

for at least twenty minutes. This could be something like reading a book, going for a walk, or listening to music.

3

When you feel calmed,

communicate that you are ready to re-join the conversation.

Give and Receive Repair Attempts

You're in the middle of an argument with your partner, and all of the sudden they say, "I didn't realize that's how you felt about ____." Your partner just attempted a repair. What do you say back to them? Does this statement lead you to resolve the problem?

REPAIR ATTEMPTS IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT CONVERSATIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE. *THEY CAN SOUND LIKE...*

- I just need this to be calmer right now
- Can I take that back?
- I need your support right now
- Let me try again
- I'm sorry
- I messed up, I can see my part in this
- I want to say this more gently but I don't know how to
- I know this isn't your fault
- Thank you for sharing this with me
- Let's talk about something else for a few minutes
- I had no idea
- I see your point
- I understand
- I love you

A repair attempt is any statement or action—verbal, physical, or otherwise—meant to diffuse negativity and keep a conflict from escalating out of control. During a difficult conversation, you and your partner should utilize and also be open to accepting repair attempts. This helps to keep the conversation on track and reinforces your mutual respect and love for each other.

Acknowledge Underlying Dreams

A lot of the time, what you're arguing about isn't the actual issue. It's often something underlying driving the conflict. Reflecting on arguments they've had, many couples will say, "I don't even remember why it started," or, "It was over nothing." Arguments and conflict may begin to feel frustrating or unresolved for you.

There is a reason you're arguing with your partner. Dreams, deeply held values, and beliefs lie at the root of every conflict you and your partner have, even if it seems silly at first.

For example, you might dismiss a squabble over who gets to pick the movie for date night as

"fighting about nothing." But, if you investigate why it turned into a tiff at all, you might remember that your opinion or taste was often dismissed by your family growing up. Or maybe your partner is feeling like they aren't being heard in the relationship or don't have an equal say.

Next time you find you and your partner arguing about "nothing," consider that it might actually be "something" and take the opportunity to learn, to connect, and to understand. Ask them about their feelings, ask them why they are upset, ask them what's going on... and really listen.

After

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Process the Argument

Processing requires you to be able to talk about what happened without starting another fight, so wait until you're both calm.

When you're ready to process, imagine you're sitting in the balcony of a theater looking down at yourselves on the stage. Play the situation over again in your mind. How did the argument start? Do you even remember? Talk it out with your partner. What can you each do better next time?

HERE ARE 3 STEPS TO PROCESSING THE ARGUMENT TOGETHER:

1

EACH PARTNER HAS A TURN TO TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY FELT:
"I felt [_____]"

- Defensive
- Not listened to
- My feelings got hurt
- Totally flooded
- Angry
- Sad
- Unloved
- Misunderstood
- Criticized
- That my complaint was taken personally
- Worried
- Afraid
- Unsafe
- Out of control
- Righteously indignant
- Unfairly picked on
- Stupid
- Like leaving
- Overwhelmed with emotion
- Lonely
- Ashamed

2

Discuss and validate both subjective realities

Talk about how you each saw the situation, remembering that neither of your perspectives is "wrong." Focus on each of your feelings and needs. It is crucial that you validate your partner's experience and communicate that you understand at least some of their perspective. Dr. John Gottman's research demonstrates that you can only be influential if you accept influence.

VALIDATION RESPONSES CAN SOUND LIKE:

- "I can understand how you felt that way."
- "It sounds like you were very upset and hurt by what I said."
- "I didn't know that's how I came off."
- (Reflect what they said) "So, when I raised my voice, that made you feel attacked."

3

Accept responsibility.

WHAT ROLE DID YOU PLAY IN THIS FIGHT?

- “I’ve been very stressed lately.”
- “I can see that I’ve taken you for granted.”
- “I know I’ve been overly critical lately.”
- “I haven’t been emotionally available.”
- “I’ve been depressed lately.”
- “I didn’t ask for what I needed.”
- “I’ve been running on empty.”

When you approach your arguments as an opportunity to learn more about each other, you’ll create a more productive and positive outcome.

Every conflict offers an opportunity for a *deeper understanding* of each other.

Building a happy, healthy relationship is hard work and requires growth from both partners. At times, this can mean processing difficult events and tolerating discomfort. Stay curious and remember it’s not what you fight about that matters, but how you repair and move forward together.