



Repairing After a Fight: A Guide for Couples

An explainer and repair conversation guide · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- All couples fight. What matters most is how they repair afterward.
- Successful couples make frequent "repair attempts," small gestures that de-escalate conflict.
- A structured repair conversation helps both partners feel heard and reconnect.

Conflict isn't the problem

Dr. John Gottman's research found that many conflicts in relationships are about ongoing differences that never fully go away. Happy couples aren't those who never argue. They're the ones who argue with respect and repair afterward.

What gets in the way

Gottman identified four patterns that damage relationships, which he called the "Four Horsemen," and their antidotes:

Pattern	Sounds like	Antidote
Criticism	"You never help. You're so selfish."	Gentle start-up: "I feel overwhelmed. Could you help with dinner?"
Contempt	Eye-rolling, sarcasm, mocking	Build appreciation and respect
Defensiveness	"It's not my fault, you're the one who..."	Take responsibility for your part
Stonewalling	Shutting down, walking away silently	Self-soothe, then return to the conversation

The emotional layer

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) teaches that underneath most fights is a question: "Are you there for me? Do I matter to you?" When partners can share the softer feelings beneath anger, such as hurt, fear, or loneliness, they can reconnect.

What the research says

Gottman's research identified criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling as strong predictors of relationship breakdown, and repair attempts as key to relationship success (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Emotionally Focused Therapy, based on attachment theory, helps couples repair emotional bonds and is supported by research (Johnson, 2008).

Tool: Our Repair Conversation Guide

Wait until you are both calm, at least a few hours or a day after the fight. Take turns: one speaks, the other listens without interrupting, then switch.

#	Step	My notes
1	Share what you felt during the fight (use feeling words, not blame).	
2	Share what you saw from your side: "My reality was..."	
3	Name any triggers from past experiences that came up.	
4	Take responsibility for your part: "I regret..."	
5	Share what would help next time: "One thing I need is..."	

Repair phrases you can use mid-argument

"Can we start over?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it came out."

"I can see your point."

"Can we take a break? I want to come back to this."

"I love you, and I'm frustrated right now."

Strategies to try

- **Accept repair attempts.** When your partner reaches out, even awkwardly, try to meet them halfway.
- **Use soft start-ups.** Start conversations with "I feel" rather than "You always."
- **Build daily connection.** Small, regular moments of attention make conflict easier to repair.
- **Apologize specifically.** "I'm sorry I raised my voice" lands better than "Sorry you're upset."

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Hold a daily stress-reducing conversation.** Spend 20 minutes each day talking about stress outside the relationship, while the listener takes your side. Gottman found this protects couples from spillover conflict.
- **Turn toward bids.** Notice small bids for attention ("Look at this!") and respond. Couples who turn toward bids more often tend to stay together.
- **Ask love map questions.** Ask questions like "What's worrying you lately?" or "What are you looking forward to?" to stay current with each other's inner world.
- **Share the softer feeling.** Under anger is often hurt or fear. Try, "When you didn't call, I felt scared I didn't matter."

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What do we usually fight about? What might be underneath it?

What do I tend to do during a fight: criticize, defend, or shut down?

What helps me feel close to my partner again after conflict?

What do I most need my partner to understand about me?

When to reach out for support

If you're stuck in the same fight, repair feels impossible, or you feel disconnected, couples therapy can help. Our clinicians use approaches such as the Gottman Method and Emotionally Focused Therapy. If you ever feel unsafe in your relationship, please seek help right away.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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