

Gottman's Five Steps for Resolving Conflict



NEW PATHS COUNSELLING

A Simple Guide to Healthier, More Connected Conversations

According to Dr. John Gottman's research, couples who successfully work through conflict tend to use the same core skills. These steps help protect the relationship, reduce defensiveness, and keep communication grounded in respect and care.

Let's review these steps:

1. Soften Your Startup

A harsh startup can lead to increased emotional distance in the relationship. Harsh startup is often a response that develops when a partner feels that their lower-level complaints or issues are not responded to. For the partner who may be more likely to use harsh startup, it is important to practice softening this approach- how the conversation begins often predicts how it will end.

These are some strategies for starting more gently:

Complain but don't blame	<p><u>Try:</u> <i>"You said you were going to put away the clean laundry and it's still sitting in the baskets - I'm really frustrated about that, could you finish that?"</i></p> <p><u>Instead of:</u> <i>"I asked you to put that laundry away but I should have known better, you still haven't done it."</i></p>
Make Statements that Start With "I"	<p><u>Try:</u> <i>"I'm not feeling heard right now."</i></p> <p><u>Instead of:</u> <i>"You're not listening to me."</i></p>
Describe What is Happening, Don't Evaluate or Judge	<p><u>Try:</u> <i>"I seem to be the only one picking up the kids' toys today."</i></p> <p><u>Instead of:</u> <i>"You're not listening to me."</i></p>
Be Clear	<p><u>Try:</u> <i>"Could you put your dishes in the dishwasher after dinner?"</i></p> <p><u>Instead of:</u> <i>"You left the kitchen a total mess."</i></p>

Be Appreciative

Try:

“Could you put your dishes in the dishwasher after dinner?”

Instead of:

“You left the kitchen a total mess.”

2. Learn to Make and Receive Repair Attempts

When a discussion starts off on the wrong foot or ends up in a negative cycle, a repair attempt is any statement that tries to “put on the brakes” or reduce the tension. The repair attempt doesn’t need to be perfect - what matters more is that the other partner recognizes it.

For couples who may need some guidance or ideas around phrases to use for repair attempts, this list is taken from Dr. Gottman’s book “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”:

I Feel

I’m getting scared.
Please say that more gently.
That hurt my feelings.
I’m feeling sad.
I’m feeling blamed, could you rephrase that?

Sorry

My reactions were too extreme.
I’m sorry.
I really blew that one.
Let me try again.
I want to be gentler right now, and I don’t know how.
Tell me what you hear me saying.

I Need to Calm Down

Can you make things feel safer for me?
I need things to be calmer right now.
I need your support right now.
Just listen to me and try to understand me.
Can I take that back?

Get to Yes

I agree with part of what you’re saying.
Let’s compromise here.
Let’s find our common ground.
I never thought of it that way.
Let’s agree to include both our views in
I see what you’re talking about.
One thing I admire about you.....

Solution

I can see my part in all this.
How can I make things better?
Let's try that over again.
What you are saying is...

Stop Action

I might be wrong here.
Please, let's stop for a while.
Give me a moment, I'll be back.
I'm feeling flooded.
Let's agree to disagree here.
Hang in there, don't withdraw.
We are getting offtrack

I Appreciate

I know this isn't your fault.
My part of this problem is....
I see your point.
Thank you for...
That's a good point.
We are both saying....
I understand.
I love you.
This is not your problem, it's our problem.

3. Soothe Yourself and Each Other

When emotions run high, the nervous system can become overwhelmed.

Taking a break or using calming strategies helps both partners stay regulated.

Self-soothing ideas:

- Slow breathing
- A short walk
- Splashing cool water
- Grounding through the senses

Co-soothing ideas:

- "We're okay – let's slow down."
- "I care about you. Let's take a moment."

Regulation makes problem-solving possible.

4. Compromise

Healthy conflict isn't about winning – it's about finding a middle ground that honours both people's needs.

Genuine compromise is only possible after following the steps above - soft startup, repair attempts and staying calm. Another important element of compromise is accepting influence from each other. This means having an open mind to our partner's goals, desires, and opinions. We don't need to agree with everything, but we need to be genuinely open to considering their position/opinion.

Here are some questions to ask yourselves when hearing each other's opinions about a matter:

- What do we agree about?
- What common goals can we have here?
- How can we understand this situation?
- What are the most important feelings here?
- What need(s) is my partner communicating to me (that might be different from mine)?
- How do we think these goals should be accomplished? How can we incorporate both partner's needs and goals?

Compromise is not giving up – it's collaborating.

STEP 5: Be Tolerant of Each Other's Faults

It's not uncommon for marriages to become weighed down by wishes about what the other partner would change or what was different about the partner. But this pattern of thinking will make conflicts difficult to resolve because we will always be focused on "changing" our partner. Conflict resolution isn't focused on changing our partner; rather, it's about negotiating and compromising and finding common ground between two unique individuals- finding ways to accommodate each other.

No partner is perfect.

Successful couples accept that differences, quirks, and imperfections are part of being human.

This looks like:

- giving the benefit of the doubt
- remembering your partner's positive qualities
- choosing compassion over criticism
- recognizing that flaws don't equal lack of love

Tolerance creates emotional safety – the foundation of lasting connection.

Wishing your growth and connection in your journey together...



New Paths Counselling

Adapted from: "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" (Gottman)