

Aftermath of a Fight or Regrettable Incident

SOURCE: GOTTMAN TREATING AFFAIRS AND TRAUMA CLINICAL MANUAL.
Also available in booklet format as handout for your couples – visit gottman.com.

This exercise is for processing past fights, regrettable incidents or emotional injuries. “Processing” means that you can talk about the incident without getting back into it again. It needs to be a two-way conversation, describing what you saw as if you were watching characters in a movie or play. This requires calm and some emotional distance from the incident.

Before You Begin

Keep in mind that the **goal** is greater understanding—addressing *how* the issue was talked about, without getting back into the fight. So, wait until you’re both calm. Assume that each of your realities has validity. Do not focus on “the facts.” Pay attention to the common barriers to communication and their antidotes as you move through the process. Keeping the “Four Horsemen” diagram handy can help.

STEP ONE

Feelings: Share how you felt. Do not say why you felt that way. Avoid commenting on your partner’s feelings.

I felt...

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1. defensive | 19. out of control | 37. I wanted to win this one
my opinions didn’t even matter |
| 2. not listened to | 20. frustrated | 38. there was a lot of give and take |
| 3. feelings got hurt | 21. righteously indignant | 39. I had no feelings at all |
| 4. totally flooded | 22. morally justified | 40. I had no idea what I was feeling |
| 5. angry | 23. unfairly picked on | 41. lonely |
| 6. sad | 24. unappreciated | 42. alienated |
| 7. unloved | 25. disliked | 43. ashamed |
| 8. misunderstood | 26. unattractive | 44. guilty |
| 9. criticized | 27. stupid | 45. culpable |
| 10. took a complaint personally | 28. morally outraged | 46. abandoned |
| 11. like you didn’t like me | 29. taken for granted | 47. disloyal |
| 12. not cared about | 30. like leaving | 48. exhausted |
| 13. worried | 31. like staying and talking this
through | 49. foolish |
| 14. afraid | 32. overwhelmed with emotion | 50. overwhelmed |
| 15. unsafe | 33. not calm | 51. remorseful |
| 16. tense | 34. stubborn | 52. shocked |
| 17. I was right and you were wrong | 35. powerless | 53. tired |
| 18. both of us were partly right | 36. I had no influence | |

STEP TWO

Realities: Describe your "reality." Take turns. Summarize and validate at least a part of your partner's reality.

Subjective Reality and Validation

- a. Take turns describing your perceptions, your own reality of what happened during the regrettable incident. Describe yourself and your perception. Do not describe your partner. Avoid attack and blame. Talk about what you might have needed from your partner. Describe your perceptions like a reporter, giving an objective minute-by-minute description. Say "I heard you saying," rather than "You said."
- b. Summarize and then validate your partner's reality by saying something like, "It makes sense to me how you saw this and what your perceptions and needs were. I get it." Use empathy by saying something like, "I can see why this upset you." Validation does not mean you agree, but that you can understand even a part of your partner's experience of the incident.
- c. 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 THREE

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.

As you think back, 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 he/she can understand why that is a trigger for you. Sharing your stories helps your partner understand you. As you think about your early history or childhood, is there another story that relates to what got triggered in you (your "enduring vulnerabilities")? Your partner needs to know you, so they 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

Tell your partner what part of their story and feelings made sense to you. After summarizing and validating ask your partner, “Did I get it?” and “Is there anything else?”

STEP FOUR

Responsibility: Acknowledge your own role in contributing to the fight or regrettable incident.

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

What set me up for the miscommunication

Share how you set yourself up to get into this conflict. Read aloud the items that were true for you on the following list:

1. I'd been very stressed and irritable lately.
2. I'd not expressed much appreciation toward you lately.
3. I'd taken you for granted.
4. I'd been overly sensitive lately.
5. I'd been overly critical lately.
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 lately.
11. I'd had a chip on my shoulder lately.
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 lately.
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.

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

What do you wish to apologize for?

(Read aloud) I'm sorry that:

1. I over-reacted.
2. I was really grumpy.
3. I was defensive.
4. I was so negative.

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

STEP FIVE

Constructive Plans: Together, plan one way that each of you can make it better next time.

Share one thing **your partner** can do to make a discussion of this issue better next time.

(It is important to remain calm as you do this.)

Then, while it is 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.

WRITE YOUR PLAN TO MAKE IT BETTER: