

Conflict Repair in Intimate Relationships

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All couples experience tensions and every intimate relationship has its problems. What matters most for the well-being of couples is not so much preventing conflict, but repairing it (Gottman, 2011). At its core, conflict repair involves impeding the escalation of discord and remediating its negative effects after the escalation has taken place. More specifically, successful conflict repair entails softening the escalation as it begins ramping up, and if the escalation becomes unmanageable, it facilitates getting the relationship back on track after the escalation has taken place. This article addresses the different attunement and restorative strategies intimate partners can employ to repair escalated conflict in their relationship.

Softening Conflict

When disagreements begin to escalate, softening the conflict is achieved by decelerating it with emotional and verbal attunement. In his research on relationship conflict, Gottman (2011) found that the ability of partners to attune to each other's emotions was one of the most important factors involved in reducing the rise of tension in their conflicts. He observed that when attunement took place, couples in his studies consistently avoided disapproval or dismissal of negative emotions, and instead focused on "being there" for each other when they experienced agitation or some pressing need.

Emotional Attunement. Gottman (2011) uses the word "ATTUNE" as an acronym to identify the six basic remedial responses he observed when couples were able to impede the escalation of their conflict. These six reparative responses are as follows:

- Awareness of emotions
- Turning toward emotions
- Tolerance of emotions
- Understanding of emotions
- Non-defensive listening to emotions
- Empathy toward emotions

Awareness. The aware speaker responds to smaller, less escalated displays of negative emotion, without blaming the other partner. The aware listener takes the other partner's "emotional temperature," usually asking questions like, "What's going on?"

Turning Toward. This means that partners tend to talk about their feelings in terms of their positive needs, instead of talking about what they don't need or want. When turning toward, the speaker identifies what would have worked better if the discussion of the negative emotion or incident were replayed.

Tolerance. With tolerance, each partner subscribes to the belief that in every negative emotional event there are always two different, but equally valid, perceptions of the event.

Tolerance is also a recognition that it makes sense to talk about emotions and that it is productive to fully process emotions with oneself and one's partner.

Understanding. These couples, through listening to one another, seek an understanding of their partner's emotions—their meaning, their history—and whatever events may have escalated the misunderstanding, conflict, or hurt feelings. When they are listening to their partner, they postpone their own agenda in order to understand their partner's point of view.

Non-defensive Listening. To facilitate understanding, attuned partners down-regulate their own defensiveness and emotional reactivity as they are listening to their partner's negative emotions and perceptions. In particular, they do not get distracted by discussions of "the facts," but stay tuned into their partners' experience of the situation.

Empathy. This aspect of attunement refers to listening to the other partner's negative emotions with concern and understanding while attempting to see these feelings through the other partner's eyes. As such, empathetic listeners become keenly aware of their partner's distress and pain.

Verbal Attunement. At the verbal level, softening the conflict involves brief expressions partners employ to reduce or eliminate negativity in their interaction with one another (Gottman, 1999). These verbal expressions can involve commenting on the communication itself, supporting or soothing the other partner, or providing appreciations to ease the negativity of the complaints. However, despite their positive intent, these repair attempts are not always presented nicely. If one partner yells, "You're getting off the topic!" or grumbles, "Can we just give it a rest?" it is still a repair attempt despite the negative delivery. If the other partner listens just to the tone voice rather than to the words, he or she will likely miss the imbedded message of "Stop! This is getting out of hand."

Because repair attempts can be difficult to hear when a relationship is engulfed in negativity, the best strategy is to be as explicit as possible in order for them to have sufficient impact. By consistently using these repairs when disagreements get too negative, and by implementing them in conjunction with emotional attunement strategies, they will help keep arguments from escalating to unmanageable levels. What follows are a list of specific de-escalation phrases that Gottman (1999) found to be associated with effective repair attempts.

I Feel Phrases: I must have said something wrong, please say that more gently, that hurt my feelings, I'm feeling unappreciated, I feel blamed, I don't feel you understand me right now, I feel defensive, I'm getting worried, and can you rephrase that?

Calm Down Phrases: I need things to be calmer, I need your support right now, just listen to me for now and try to understand, tell me you love me, please be quiet and listen to me, please be gentler with me, I need to finish what I'm saying, I am starting to feel criticized, and can we take a break?

Sorry Phrases: My reactions were too extreme, I blew that one, let me try again, tell me what you hear me saying, I see my part in this, let's try that over again, let me start again in a softer way, and I'm sorry for being so pushy.

Getting to Yes Phrases: I agree with part of what you're saying, let's find some common ground, this problem is not very serious in the context of the big picture, I think your point of view makes sense, let's agree to include both our views in a solution, I see what you're talking about, I think we can work this out.

Stop Action Phrases: I might be wrong here, let's take a break, I'm feeling flooded, let's agree to disagree here, let's start over again, we are getting off track, I want to change the topic, let's start all over again, and please give me a moment.

I Appreciate Phrases: I know this isn't your fault, I see your point, that's a good point, we are both saying..., I am grateful for ..., what I admire about you is..., and this is not your problem, it's our problem.

While these phrases may sound somewhat contrived, it is because they likely offer a very different way of speaking when partners become upset. However, awkwardness in using these phrases should not be a reason to reject them. When learning a better and more effective way of holding a tennis racket, it might feel "uncomfortable" or "unnatural" at first, simply because it is unfamiliar. The same goes for these repair attempts. Over time, these phrases should come more easily; and eventually, both partners should be able to adapt them to their own style of attunement (Gottman, 1999).

Getting Back on Track

While softening conflict is a repair about deescalating the tension in disputes, getting back on track facilitates healing after a disagreement has already escalated into disappointment and hostility. This state of affairs usually takes place when varying degrees of emotional dysregulation have taken place with some accompanying combination of criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt prevailing in the disagreement (Gottman, 2011).

When there are sustained hurt and resentful feelings from an escalated conflict, getting back on track is needed to restore the goodwill and harmony in the relationship. Essentially, this type of repair entails four basic steps: (1) partners taking responsibility for any harshness and/or intemperance they exhibited, (2) partners sincerely apologizing for their lack of restraint and/or any rashness they displayed, (3) partners identifying what corrective steps they will take in the future to handle their disagreements in a more constructive manner, and (4) partners forgiving one another for their transgressions.

Taking Responsibility. The start of a genuine repair should typically begin with both partners accepting responsibility for their part in any counterproductive behavior they engaged in during a dispute. At this juncture, each partner should confine themselves to their role in contributing to the escalation that took place. Taking

responsibility in this manner should solely focus on how each party mishandled the dispute. No matter how aggrieved one partner may feel, attempts to assign blame to the other partner will tend to detour the repair into tit-for-tat sequences about who was ultimately responsible for what went wrong. Instead, both partners must unilaterally be willing to acknowledge each of their roles in furthering their conflict (Gottman, 1999).

Taking the initiative to accept responsibility for a relationship problem, whether it involves marital or other social relationships, has been shown to be one of the most important first steps in successfully resolving interpersonal conflicts (Gottman, 2011; Lewicki, Polin, & Lount, 2016). However, this first step is often one of the most difficult initiatives to take because both partners tend to see themselves as responding to aggravation rather than generating it. Moreover, even when they can acknowledge their own problematic behavior, they often tend to feel justified in their negative ways of treating their partner because of how they feel mistreated in the first place. The result is that both partners tend to become caught up in a mutual blame cycle where they believe they are only treating the other badly because they are being treated badly (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

One of the most effective ways of getting out of this predicament is for the couple to reframe their relationship problems as mutual ones in which each party has his or her own particular way of contributing to the conflict. However reasonable this mutuality principle may seem, it requires both partners to put aside their egos and acknowledge that their flaws and insecurities can get the best of them in their disagreements and in taking responsibility for repairing them. This demonstration of humility reflects a kind of vulnerability that is particularly important in intimate relationships where trust and attachment constitute the underlying basis for well-being (Greenberg, 2002; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006).

Offering Apology. Once partners accept responsibility for their role in the conflict, and particularly for contributing to its escalation, the stage is set for the partners to express sincere apologies for their behavior. This is the point in the relationship repair where the partners express regret for the disharmony they have caused and express empathy for the upsetting feelings they have precipitated. After taking responsibility for their behavior, this step involves not only the verbal expression of regret and empathy, but it also requires congruent tone of voice and accompanying body language that shows sincere contrition. Apologies that lack these qualities can be easily interpreted as instrumental maneuvers that are more geared to “let’s just be nice” or “let’s get this over with,” rather than manifesting a genuine understanding of the hurt and harm the partners have caused one another.

Taking Corrective Measures. Identifying corrective action comprises another key element in accepting an apology and getting the relationship back on track. A key factor in making an apology more acceptable is specifying what can be done to avoid further mishaps in how partners handle conflict with one another. Commitment and effort to employ more active listening, less defensive argumentation, increased effort to give the benefit of the doubt, better temper control, calmer delivery, more constructive

engagement, and other pertinent remedies need to be offered and implemented as a critical component to a successful apology.

Corrective measures provide partners with a modicum of assurance that there is an awareness and a commitment about how to rectify their behavior so they will not as likely repeat their same mistakes again. This gesture helps partners lower their defenses and open the door to forgiveness because it provides a framework for reducing the threat of future mishaps. However, how far the door can be opened will largely depend on the degree of hurt and resentment involved and the capacity for the partners to follow through with their commitment to change the way in which they react to one another. As the saying goes, “The best apologies consist of changes in behavior.”

Finding Forgiveness. Forgiveness is essentially a decision to let go of the resentments and thoughts of retribution partners have toward one another from their fighting (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). The precursors to forgiveness are taking personal responsibility, offering sincere apologies, and taking corrective measures to mitigate future mistreatment. When and if these steps toward reconciliation are taken, then genuine forgiveness is possible. However, when the resulting injuries from a couple’s conflict entangle them in the unfairness of how they were treated, they typically cannot respond constructively to these repair attempts. They subsequently move into a state of resistance, concluding that since their ill treatment was unjustified, it should have never happened; and because it should have never happened, resentment and anger are justified as preventive safeguards and/or as means of seeking retribution.

Typically, mistreatment in an argument is hard to accept. When something is hard to accept, partners often move toward interpretations that service their hurt feelings and prolong their distress. Finding resolution involves replacing these hurtful interpretations with ones that are open to other possibilities embedded in the ensuing repair efforts. Even more fundamentally, since the injury or injustice has already occurred, finding resolution ultimately means coming to terms with the fact that these wrongs have already taken place and nothing can be done to change them. This approach, known as radical forgiveness, essentially interprets the mistreatment as a *fait accompli* with nothing to be gained by holding on to the hurt and resentment. It certainly does not suggest or mean that the partners should accept their mistreatment as okay, it just means they can choose to let it go if they want to achieve some resolution and preserve their relationship (Bach, 2004).

By choosing to let go of hurt and resentment, partners can allow themselves to continue working on their relationship with the understanding that their negative feelings do not have to define them. Toward this end, a general rule of thumb is that both partners should routinely attempt to get their relationship back on track within an hour of experiencing an unmanageable escalation and take no longer than twenty-four hours if the conflict was particularly difficult. Ultimately these efforts should culminate in finding forgiveness because, as writer Elizabeth Gilbert (2010) prudently observes, “forgiveness may be the only antidote we are offered in love, to combat the inescapable disappointments of intimacy” (p. 133)

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