

Repair in Intimate Relationships

Paul David, Ph.D.

Every couple experiences tensions and every intimate relationship has its problems. What matters most for the well being of couples is not so much that they can prevent conflict, but that they can repair it (Gottman, 2011). At its core, repairing conflict involves impeding its escalation and/or remediating its negative effects when it has escalated. More specifically, repair takes place when partners attempt to soften their conflict, recognize each other's point of view, and work at getting their relationship back on track.

In his research on relationship conflict, Gottman (2011) found that one of the most important factors involved in making effective repairs is the ability of partners to attune to each other's emotions. When attunement took place, he observed that the couples in his studies consistently avoided disapproval or dismissal of negative emotions, and instead focused on "being there" for each other whenever they experienced agitation or expressed some pressing need.

Repair Attunement

Gottman (2011) uses the word "ATTUNE" as an acronym to identify the six basic remedial responses he observed when couples were able to make successful repairs. 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 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, while 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 compassion and understanding while attempting to see these feelings through the other partner's eyes. As such, empathetic listeners become keenly aware of the distress and pain of their partners.

Repair Attempts

At the interactive level, repair attempts are the brief expressions partners employ to reduce or eliminate negativity in their interaction with each other (Gottman & Silver, 1999). They 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, repair attempts do not always come nicely packaged. 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 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 make your attempts as explicit as possible in order to emphasize them. Below you will find a long list of phrases that Gottman and Silver (1999) found to be associated with effective repair attempts. These are specific words you can say to your partner to de-escalate the tension. By consistently using them when disagreements get too negative, and by implementing them in conjunction with the attunement strategies, you will be able to keep your discussions from escalating to unmanageable levels.

I Feel

- I'm getting scared.
- Please say that more gently.
- Did I do something wrong?
- That hurt my feelings.
- That felt like an insult.
- I'm feeling sad.
- I feel blamed. Can you rephrase that?
- I'm feeling unappreciated.
- I feel defensive. Can you rephrase that?
- Please don't lecture me.
- I don't feel like you understand me right now.

- I am starting to feel flooded.
- I feel criticized. Can you rephrase that?
- I'm getting worried.

I Need to Calm Down

- Can you make things safer for me?
- I need things to be calmer right now.
- I need your support right now.
- Just listen to me right now and try to understand.
- Tell me you love me.
- Can I have a kiss?
- Can I take that back?
- Please be gentler with me.
- Please help me calm down.
- Please be quiet and listen to me.
- This is important to me. Please listen.
- I need to finish what I was saying.
- I am starting to feel flooded.
- I feel criticized. Can you rephrase that?
- Can we take a break?

Sorry

- My reactions were too extreme. Sorry.
- I really blew that one.
- Let me try again.
- I want to be gentler to you right now, and I don't know how.
- Tell me what you hear me saying.
- 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 ...
- Let me start again in a softer way.
- I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Get to Yes

- You're starting to convince me.
- I agree with part of what you're saying.
- Let's compromise here.
- Let's find our common ground.
- I never thought of things that way.
- This problem is not very serious in the big picture.
- I think your point of view makes sense.
- Let's agree to include both our views in a solution.

- I am thankful for ...
- One thing I admire about you is...
- I see what you're talking about.

Stop Action!

- I might be wrong here.
- Please, let's stop for a while.
- Let's take a break.
- Give me a moment. I'll be back.
- I'm feeling flooded.
- Please stop.
- Let's agree to disagree here.
- Let's start all over again.
- Hang in there. Don't withdraw.
- I want to change the topic.
- We are getting off track.

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.
- I am thankful for ...
- One thing I admire about you is ...
- This is not your problem, it's *our* problem.

Many of these phrases may sound somewhat phony and contrived to you right now. That is because they likely offer a very different way of speaking with your partner when you are upset. However, awkwardness in using them should not be a reason to reject them. If you learned a better and more effective way to hold your tennis racket, it would feel "wrong" and "unnatural" initially, simply because you were not used to it. The same goes for these repair attempts. Over time these phrases should come more easily to you, and you will likely be able to modify them to more closely fit your own style of communication (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

References

- Gottman, J. M. (2011). *The science of trust*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.