

The Art of Having a Damn Good Fight

A Couples Workbook for Repair After a Fight



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Before you begin

Important

This workbook is designed for after a conflict, not for the peak of an argument. It will not tell you who was right. Its purpose is to help you see two subjective realities, understand each other's vulnerable places, take responsibility for your part, and find a constructive next step.

Based on John and Julie Gottman's five-step process for working through a regrettable incident. Adapted here as a guided self-practice for couples.

Before you begin: are you ready to talk about this fight?

Do not start this conversation while either of you is still emotionally flooded - wanting to shout, attack, defend at all costs, escape, or force the other person to admit fault. First, regain enough calm to listen and reflect.

- ☐ I can listen to my partner without interrupting or rehearsing my response.
- ☐ I am willing to accept that my partner's experience may be different from mine.
- ☐ I can talk about myself instead of proving what kind of person my partner is.
- ☐ We both agree to pause if the conversation becomes too intense again.

The central rule

Understanding does not mean agreeing. One fight can contain two different realities, both of which were real to the people experiencing them.

HOW TO USE EACH STEP

Understand introduces the idea. Lena & Max shows it in a real-life example. Try together gives you the actions. Write & reflect makes room for your own experience. The comics invite a smile at familiar habits; they are not instructions to copy them.

LENA & MAX

Our example couple: Lena and Max

Lena and Max have been together for eight years and have a young child. Over the past year, Max has been working a lot. The family has been through a financially stressful period, and creating stability feels especially important to him. Lena also works, while carrying more of the household and emotional load. She is increasingly afraid that they are turning from a couple into a team that simply manages life: a child, work, errands, bills, sleep - with very little closeness left between them.

On Friday, Max says he wants to spend Saturday with friends. Lena replies, "Of course. Go. You live as if you don't even have a family anyway." Max explodes: "Whatever I do, it's never enough for you." The argument quickly expands into work, each person's contribution, sex, and whether either of them still feels wanted. Max sleeps in another room.

As we move through the five steps, we will gradually discover what was really happening between Lena and Max - while you work through your own conflict at the same time.

01 Feelings

What was happening inside me?



UNDERSTAND

Begin by naming your feelings. Do not explain why you felt them yet, and do not describe your partner. Use a simple sentence: "I felt..."

Not this / try this

Not: "I felt like you didn't care about me." That is already an interpretation of your partner. Try: "I felt lonely, unimportant, and angry."

Choose any words that fit your experience:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ defensive | ☐ unheard |
| ☐ hurt | ☐ emotionally flooded |
| ☐ angry | ☐ sad |
| ☐ unloved | ☐ misunderstood |
| ☐ criticized | ☐ as if you didn't even like me |
| ☐ abandoned | ☐ anxious |
| ☐ afraid | ☐ unsafe |
| ☐ tense | ☐ convinced I was right and you were wrong |
| ☐ that we were both partly right | ☐ out of control |
| ☐ disappointed | ☐ self-righteous |
| ☐ unfairly blamed | ☐ devalued |
| ☐ unattractive | ☐ powerless |
| ☐ lonely | ☐ disconnected |
| ☐ ashamed | ☐ exhausted |
| ☐ ready to leave | ☐ ready to stay and talk |
| ☐ regretful | |

Feelings

From their story to your conversation

LENA & MAX

What this sounds like for Lena and Max

Lena: "I felt lonely, angry, unheard, and at some point as if I didn't matter at all."

Max: "I felt criticized, devalued, rejected, and eventually I just wanted to get out of the conversation."

TRY TOGETHER

Take turns naming feelings. Let your partner finish before you speak.

For this step

Do not argue with or comment on your partner's feelings. Just hear them.

WRITE & REFLECT

Your turn

Partner 1: "During our fight, I felt..."

Partner 2: "During our fight, I felt..."

02 Realities

What did each of us experience?



UNDERSTAND

Now take turns describing how you experienced what happened. Speak like an observer: describe what you remember, heard, thought, and felt. Do not describe your partner's character or intentions.

Useful sentence starters

"I remember..." · "I heard you say..." · "At that moment I thought..." · "To me, it sounded like..."

Avoid: "You deliberately..." · "You always..." · "You wanted to make me..."

LENA & MAX

Lena tells her reality

"When I heard about Saturday with your friends, my first thought was: 'When will there be time for us?' By then I was already exhausted and had felt distance between us for several weeks. When I heard that nothing was ever enough for me, it sounded as if my exhaustion and loneliness did not matter at all."

Max summarizes: "I hear that for you this was not simply about one day with friends. You already felt lonely, and this became another sign that there was no room left for our relationship. I can understand why that hurt so much."

Max tells his reality

"When I mentioned Saturday, I wasn't thinking that I was choosing my friends over my family. I had been working a lot and imagined one day when I could switch off. When I heard, 'You live as if you don't have a family,' it felt as if everything I was doing for us had disappeared and all you could see was a bad partner."

Lena summarizes: "I hear that you experienced your work as a contribution to our security, and my words sounded like I was erasing that entire contribution. I can understand why you felt attacked."

Realities

Listening and understanding

TRY TOGETHER

Follow the sequence below, then switch roles.

WRITE & REFLECT

Now you

1. Partner A tells their version. Partner B only listens.

2. Partner B summarizes: "What I hear is that, for you..."

3. Partner B adds: "I can understand why..."

4. Partner A responds: "Yes, you understood me" or "To understand me better, you also need to know..."

5. Switch roles and repeat.

Before moving on

Each person answers: "Do I feel that my perspective has been understood?" If not, do not persuade or defend. Ask: "What else do I need to know to understand your point of view better?"

03 Triggers

Why did this hit me so hard?



UNDERSTAND

Some moments in a conflict create a much stronger reaction than the immediate situation seems to explain. Often they touch an enduring vulnerability - a sensitive place shaped by earlier experiences.

Now mentally rewind. Where else in your life have you felt something similar? It might connect to family, past relationships, school, loss, shame, loneliness, instability, or another meaningful period.

Important

You do not have to find a "trauma." And never use your partner's history against them. The purpose is to give context to today's reaction and help you become more sensitive to each other's vulnerable places.

LENA & MAX

What Lena discovers

Lena remembers that her parents stayed together for years but gradually stopped being a couple. There was no dramatic breakup; the relationship simply faded - less conversation, warmth, and interest in each other. Emotional distance in her own relationship therefore quickly activates a fear: "One day we might discover that there is nothing left between us either."

What Max discovers

Max remembers adolescence, when his father lost his job. Home became full of anxiety about money, shame, and arguments. He decided early that a responsible adult protects the family from that kind of helplessness. So Lena's words that he lives as if he has no family land precisely in the place where he is trying to be a good partner - by creating security.

A different way to see the fight

Lena is trying to protect the relationship from emotional disappearance. Max is trying to protect the family from instability. Both are protecting something important - and, in the fight, accidentally pressing each other's most painful buttons.

Triggers

Exploring your own experience

TRY TOGETHER

First, identify the exact moment: which words, gesture, silence, or action sharply intensified your reaction?

WRITE & REFLECT

Your turn

The moment that hurt or activated me most was:

A familiar feeling from my past is:

The story I want my partner to know so they can understand my reaction better is:

After listening, the partner responds: "It makes more sense to me now why this is such a sensitive place for you."

Remember

A trigger can explain the intensity of your reaction. It does not excuse how you treated your partner.

04 Responsibility

What was my part?



UNDERSTAND

For a moment, stop analyzing your partner's contribution. Ask yourself: what was already happening inside me before the fight, and what did I do that helped the conflict escalate?

Check anything that was true for you:

- ☐ Lately I have been tense and irritable.
- ☐ I was especially sensitive.
- ☐ I had not been sharing much of my inner world.
- ☐ I was emotionally unavailable.
- ☐ I was not regulating myself well.
- ☐ I had not been investing enough time in good connection between us.
- ☐ I had not asked directly for what I needed.
- ☐ I was feeling like a victim.
- ☐ I needed some time alone.
- ☐ I was very preoccupied with other problems.
- ☐ I was not feeling very confident in myself.
- ☐ I was extremely tired.

Responsibility

Owning your part

LENA & MAX

Lena

"I had been lonely for a while, but I wasn't saying it clearly enough. I was waiting for you to notice on your own, and when you didn't, I kept accumulating anger. Saying that you live as if you don't have a family was an attack. I'm sorry I hit exactly the place where you are trying so hard for us."

Max

"I really had become much more absorbed in work and emotionally distant. When you tried to tell me that you were hurting, I immediately started proving how much I do instead of hearing you. And I'm sorry I dragged sex and whether you still want me into the argument in order to hurt you back."

UNDERSTAND

A useful apology

A useful apology names your own action and its impact. It does not contain a "but," explain why your partner made you do it, or demand immediate forgiveness.

The power of presence

An apology can become more meaningful when you are emotionally present with one another. Slow down, turn toward your partner, and, if it feels comfortable for both of you, meet each other's eyes. Speak honestly, and allow yourself to take in the emotional impact of your words and actions. Give your partner space to respond, and listen without rushing to explain or defend yourself. This kind of presence and honesty can create emotional intimacy and deepen the repair process, allowing the apology to be felt as well as heard. Connection matters more than sustained eye contact, and neither closeness nor forgiveness needs to be forced.

TRY TOGETHER

Take turns. Name your action, acknowledge its impact, and let your partner respond.

Responsibility

Regret and apology

WRITE & REFLECT

Three questions for each of you

1. What did I contribute to this fight?

2. What specifically do I regret?

3. What do I want to apologize for? Begin: "I'm sorry that I..."

05 Planning

What can we do differently next time?



UNDERSTAND

Now turn understanding into a small, concrete plan. Each person names one action that would help from the partner and one action they are willing to take themselves.

Ask for an action, not a personality change

Not: "Be more considerate" or "Stop being selfish." Try: "If you realize you'll be late, send me a message" or "When I tell you I'm struggling, ask me a couple of questions before explaining your position."

LENA & MAX

Lena and Max's plan

Lena: "If you want to plan a whole day for yourself, it would help me if we first looked at when each of us gets time to rest and when we will have time together. On my side, I will try to say, 'I miss you. I need time with you,' before the loneliness turns into anger."

Max: "When you feel alone in this relationship, it would help me if you told me directly before it becomes a judgment about what kind of partner I am. On my side, I want to ask more often how you are and how we are doing, instead of waiting until you have reached your limit."

Planning

Your next chapter

TRY TOGETHER

Each name one request and one action you can take. Choose what you can both agree to.

WRITE & REFLECT

Your plan

Partner 1 - next time, it would help me if you:

On my side, I can:

Partner 2 - next time, it would help me if you:

On my side, I can:

Look at each other's suggestions. Which of them can you genuinely agree to now?

After the conversation

You do not need to end with one shared version of what happened

If you understand each other's experience a little better, can see why the fight became so painful, have acknowledged your own part, and have agreed on at least one change, you have already changed the trajectory of the conflict.

Sometimes the problem itself is still there after a good repair conversation. That is okay. Repair does not always mean solving the issue. Sometimes it means restoring enough of a sense that "we are on the same side" to continue the conversation later.

A quick check

- ☐ I named what I felt without blaming my partner.
 - ☐ I listened to my partner's subjective reality and was able to summarize it.
 - ☐ We identified vulnerabilities and triggers that intensified the conflict.
 - ☐ I acknowledged my part and apologized for specific actions.
 - ☐ We each chose at least one concrete change for next time.
- If the conversation becomes destructive again, stop. Complex or recurring conflicts can be explored with a couples therapist.